THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CRUCIBLE EXPERIENCES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SELECTION OF NORTHERN IRISH AND OTHER EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN LEADERS

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the material in this thesis is all my own work and has not been submitted for an award of this or any other institution.

Signed

J S Alan Wilson

Date

Abstract

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CRUCIBLE EXPERIENCES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SELECTION OF NORTHERN IRISH AND OTHER EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN LEADERS

BY J.S.ALAN WILSON

Among terms used to describe the events and experiences that contribute to the shaping of leaders is Warren Bennis' and Robert Thomas' 'crucibles'. Their use of the term emerged from a series of interviews with leaders who had come of age in two distinct eras: all the leaders interviewed referred to a transformative experience that had contributed to their leadership.

The aim of this research was to explore the significance of such experiences in the development of Christian leaders. A sample of fourteen evangelical leaders was selected and each leader participated in an in-depth qualitative interview. Their experiences were classified using Robert Thomas' three types of crucible: new territory, reversals and suspension. Analysis of the experiences demonstrated how crucible experiences had a part to play in shaping both the character and calling of a leader: at times crucibles functioned as intensified learning experiences in which a leader's beliefs took on an existential intensity.

The emerging themes of character and calling are significant in both Old and New Testaments and the project reflected theologically on these.

While crucibles may be significant features in the development of a leader, they do not tell the whole story: a range of factors and influences, some of which work in a more gradual way, are also part of a leadership journey.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 The shaping of leaders

Several terms have been used to describe the transformative events that appear to form part of a leader's journey. For example, Moxley and Pulley (2003) discuss 'hardships' that cannot be avoided, but must be seen as opportunities for learning; Gonzales (2010) notes several terms, including 'triggers' and 'critical events'; Olivares (2011) refers to 'momentous events'; Bennis and Thomas (2002) discuss 'crucibles', the term that will be adopted in this thesis.

1.2 'Crucibles'

In their book *Geeks and Geezers,*[1] Bennis and Thomas examined the impact of era on two generations of leaders who came of age in distinct eras: the first in what they term 'the era of limits' (1945-1954), and the second in 'the era of options' (1991-2000). Besides highlighting several important differences between the generations, the authors 'found that every leader in [their] study, young or old, had undergone at least one intense, transformational experience' (2002, p.14): these were 'crucible' experiences.

Among definitions of 'crucible', the *American Heritage Dictionary* includes 'a vessel for melting material at high temperatures' (cited in Bennis & Thomas, 2002, p.14). That mediaeval alchemists failed in their attempts to transform base metals into gold does not deter Bennis and Thomas from using the metaphor 'for the circumstances that cause an individual to be utterly transformed' (2002, p.14).

The crucible experiences they described were diverse: 'as varied as being mentored, mastering a martial art, climbing a mountain, and losing an election' (2002, p.14). A crucible may take the form of a harsh or tragic event, but 'sometimes the crucible was

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[1] Subsequently revised under the title *Leading for a Lifetime: How Defining Moments Shape Leaders of Today and Tomorrow*.

an upbeat, even joyous experience' (p.14). The crucibles were defining moments and turning points that helped prepare leaders for their future (p.16).

In a later book, Thomas adds that 'the crucible experience was a trial and a test, a point of deep self-reflection that challenged [the leaders we interviewed] to step up and be someone or do something they'd never been or done before' (2008, p.9).

1.3 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore what kinds of 'crucible' experiences have contributed to the formation of a sample of Christian leaders and to analyse ways in which these experiences have done this.[2] The analysis will suggest that crucible experiences play a part both in who the leader is (character) and in what the leader does (calling).

I will also explore whether crucibles tell the whole story of a leader's development or whether, as Robert Allio (2003) suggested in his review of *Geeks and Geezers*, the crucible is really a crock-pot.[3] What are we to make of other, less dramatic, events and factors in a leader's development?

Leaders who participated in the research described experiences that could be classified as crucible experiences. Some spoke about life-changing conversion experiences that became foundational to their leadership journeys. There were crisis experiences, either personal crises that demonstrated a need for growth in character and spirituality, or leadership crises, when the participant's leadership was questioned or when leadership-defining decisions had to be made. The interviews also highlighted unusual and, sometimes unexpected, spiritual experiences which contributed to significant paradigm shifts.

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[2] The project did not attempt to measure the frequency of crucible experiences, focusing rather on the significance of the experiences in the leader's development. Swinton and Mowat claim that 'within qualitative research the quest is … for *meaning* and a deeper *understanding* of situations' (2006, p.loc784).

[3] He has suggested that 'the leadership psyche evolves through a series of experiences rather than through a singular epiphany' (From a personal email, January, 2015).

The focus of selection was on experienced leaders who have (so far) successfully navigated the experiences of their leadership journeys. Restricting the focus in this way potentially excludes two groups. The first is those leaders who have not experienced any form of crucible, either because their leadership journey has been relatively uneventful or because they have not yet lived long enough to experience their crucibles; it is hoped that one outcome of this research may be to prepare younger leaders for future crucible experiences.

The second group is those leaders who have been derailed by crucible experiences. As Thomas (2008b, p.5) notes, 'while experience matters, what matters more is what one *makes* of experience'. Tuomo's observation that 'the crucibles of leadership should be thought of as opportunities for human growth rather than mere disasters' (2006, p.20) is pertinent: growth is not guaranteed. This second group could form the basis for further research whose value would include the potential of identifying factors that make successful navigation of crucibles more likely.

1.4 Research questions

The overall research question to be explored is:

- What significance do crucible experiences have in the shaping and development of a Christian leader?

Subsidiary questions are:

- What kinds of crucibles do Christian leaders experience?
- In what specific ways do these experiences shape a leader?
- What other factors contribute to a leader's formation?

1.5 Nature of the study and methodological approach

A series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews was conducted with fourteen experienced, and mainly older Christian leaders.[4] The interviews were recorded and each participant was given the opportunity to review a transcript of the interview, ensuring that what had been recorded was an accurate representation of their experience. The transcripts were analysed to identify significant themes, with particular attention paid to experiences that may be described as crucible experiences in keeping with how Bennis and Thomas use the term, noting the ways in which they have contributed to the shaping of the leaders.

The findings of these interviews comprise the empirical part of this study and are set against the theoretical background described by Bennis and Thomas as well as a consideration of wider aspects of leader formation from both biblical and other sources.

1.6 Outline of the thesis

Following this introductory chapter, chapter two will explore the key concepts in the literature. The chapter will begin by discussing broader questions of defining leaders and leadership. Next it will discuss theories on how leaders develop, noting in particular the place of learning from experience. Finally it will discuss the concept of the crucible experience.

Chapter three will discuss the methodological basis of the study, with its roots in qualitative phenomenology and theological reflection, and outline the procedures followed.

Chapter four will introduce the participants, with a brief biographical note to set each of them in their context.

Chapter five will present the findings of the research, summarising the kinds of experiences that may be classified as crucible experiences.

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[4] These leaders are currently working, or have spent significant time working, in what I call 'vocational Christian leadership', as ministers/pastors or leaders within specifically Christian organisations.

Chapter six will evaluate these findings and set out the principal ways in which these crucible experiences have contributed to the leaders' formation.

Chapter seven will summarise the study, noting the potential value of its findings in the development of leaders as well as highlighting areas that would merit further research.

CHAPTER 2: THE MAKING OF A LEADER

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to establish a theoretical background for the empirical part of the research. It will first discuss the relatively recent surge of interest in the subject of leadership and then review some of the definitions found in the literature, both in general sources and in sources that are written from an explicitly Christian perspective. This will lead to a consideration of the question of how leaders come to be leaders and the specific contribution of Bennis and Thomas with their concept of the crucible.

2.2 Interest in the study of leadership

The study of leaders and leadership is both ancient and complex (Stogdill & Bass, 1990, p.3). Bass suggests that 'the study of leadership rivals in age the emergence of civilization, which shaped its leaders as much as it was shaped by them' (Stogdill & Bass, 1990, p.3). Allio (2012) also notes the ancient fascination with leaders, suggesting that it was once Plato, Aristotle and Greek and Roman playwrights who comprised Western society's 'Leadership 101' reading list (2012, p.6).

If publishing industry statistics are a valid measure, it is clear that that interest has surged in recent decades (Kellerman, 2012). Allio (2012) noted more than a six-fold increase in Amazon's offerings on leaders and leadership over the previous ten years.

The increasing interest in leadership is also reflected in the increased attention being paid by researchers (Northouse, 2015, p.1). Banks and Ledbetter suggest that 'there is arguably a broader and more systematic interest in the topic today than at any time in the past' (2006, p.loc.126).

This points to a recognition of the importance of leadership and perhaps also to the not infrequent handwringing at the perceived absence of good leaders and good leadership. Bennis (1989, p.13) notes Gardner's view that 'leaders have a significant role in creating the state of mind that is the society'. The importance of leaders lies in their responsibility for the effectiveness of organisations, society's need for anchors, and concern for the integrity of institutions. In the aftermath of the Enron and Arthur Andersen scandals, Bill George wondered where all the leaders had gone, appealing for

'a new kind of leader', 'authentic leaders' who 'lead with purpose, values and integrity' (2003, p.9).

2.3 The complexity of leadership

The difficulty of the leadership task has been long acknowledged. It was none other than Machiavelli who proposed that 'there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things' (cited in Bass, 1995, p.loc. 936).

Given the burgeoning interest in the subject, it is perhaps no surprise that its complexity has made it difficult to find an agreed definition. Northouse notes that researchers have conceptualised it in different ways and used a variety of methods to study it, resulting in 'a picture of a process that is far more sophisticated and complex than the often-simplistic view presented in some of the popular books on leadership' (2015, p.1).

Stogdill points out (Stogdill & Bass, 1990, p.11) that 'there are almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept', while Kellerman (2012) refers to Rhode and Packel's count of some fifteen hundred definitions and around forty theories.

Burns' familiar observation that 'leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth' (1978, p.2) underlines a degree of confusion on the subject, while in similar vein, Bennis suggests that 'to an extent, leadership is like beauty: it's hard to define, but you know it when you see it' (1989, p.1). In contrast to science, the study of leadership has an element of inexactitude. Not only is the physical world much more orderly than the social world, but people are far from predictable. The complexity of something that involves a leader, followers and a situation has made it difficult for researchers to agree on what exactly constitutes leadership (Hughes et al., 1995).

Grint noted four problems that make it difficult to arrive at an agreed definition of leadership. First, there is disagreement on whether leadership is situated in what the leader does or in the leader's personal qualities. Second, does the leader lead from formal authority or informal influence? Third, is leadership intentional and causal or do the actions of followers depend on context and situation? Finally, is leadership

embodied in groups or individuals and is it an exclusively human phenomenon (cited in Bolden, 2004)?

2.4 Approaches to understanding leadership

How leadership is understood has implications for the question underlying this research: namely, how do leaders come to be? Part of the complexity of the task of defining leadership consists in the variety of theories that have been proposed and rejected (Bolden, 2004; Clinton, 1992; Northouse, 2015), from the Great Man Era,[5] through the quest for traits,[6] the shift of focus to styles and contingency[7] to the emergence of more recent themes such as servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970), transformational leadership (Bass, see Couto, 1995), and authentic leadership (Avolio & Luthans, 2006, George, 2007).

Other themes include the discussion of gender and leadership and questions of leadership and culture; attention has also been given to the integral role of followers in the leadership process. Allio (2012) notes that leading requires followers (and a situation) as much as it requires leaders. As followers have become more knowledgeable and have experienced greater degrees of empowerment, their significance in the leadership equation has changed. Kellerman observes that 'followers … are far sturdier than they used to be, stronger and more independent' (2012, p.loc.95).

2.4.1 Christian leadership

The burgeoning interest in the subject of leadership in general is reflected in the fascination with the subject within the Church – not least at a popular level. However,

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[5] Bredfeldt (2006, p.144) traces the roots of the Great Man theory back to Aristotle and his belief that social rank was determined through one's superior virtues which in turn were the result of one's birth.

[6] Northouse (2015, p.19) describes the trait approach as 'one of the first systematic attempts to study leadership' as researchers attempted to identify which specific traits separated leaders from non-leaders.

[7] Clinton (1992, p.28) suggests that it was Fiedler's contingency theory that 'radically shifted the focus of leadership study from behavioral analysis to leadership style analysis which also included variables beyond leadership behavior – followers and situation'.

in writing about the emerging field of leadership and administration in Practical Theology, Frank noted that 'the field … is not fully established in the academy'[8] and that it 'lacks coherence across institutional settings' (2006, p.114). He observed too that 'the sources for discussion … are more likely to be found in the world of business and commerce' (p.115). Huizing (2011) contrasts the abundance of popular publications on leadership with the rather sparse offerings on the theology of leadership in peer reviewed academically researched material. On the other hand, Bekker (2009) noted a move towards more scholarly approaches to religious leadership, not least as evidenced in the arrival on the scene of dedicated journals such as the *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership*, and the *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership.*

Bekker noted the variety of studies and approaches, including the study of biblical characters, ethical questions, comparisons with leadership and management models, and exegetical studies. He surveyed a sample of work and attempted to identify areas of agreement, concluding that 'Christian leadership is (a) mimetic … (b) concerned with a correct understanding of power … , (c) follower-centered …, and ultimately (d) Christological … ' (2009, p.148).

Among themes that have crossed over from the general literature on leadership is the concept of servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970). Wright (2000) develops his thinking under the heading of 'relational leadership'. However, Niewold argues that 'uncritical acceptance of servant leadership by Christian leaders has a distorting effect on our understanding of who Jesus Christ is, what his work is, and what his continuing presence in the world is to look like' (2007, p.120).

Further themes explored for their relevance to Christian leadership include 'authentic leadership'. One study (Puls et al., 2014) explored the relationship between authentic leadership and 'ministerial effectiveness', finding, perhaps unsurprisingly, a connection between the two.

A particular area of study concerns burnout and resilience: this will be discussed in section 2.8.

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[8] Though he notes the establishment of the Academy of Religious Leadership and the *Journal of Religious Leadership.*

An example of how biblical studies might contribute to a wider leadership context is seen in *Leadership Quarterly's* publication of Whittington's article on 'the leadership wisdom of the Apostle Paul' (2005, pp.749-770),[9] in which he highlights ten leadership qualities evidenced in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, important components in what he calls 'legacy leadership'. Whittington's work is an interesting example of how a biblical model of leadership may have a valuable contribution to the wider world of leadership, not least at a time when there is dismay at examples of unethical leadership.[10]

2.5 Defining Leadership

We turn now to questions of definition. Despite the antiquity of the concept, the term 'leadership' can be traced no further back than the first part of the nineteenth century where it appeared in the context of writing about the British Parliament (Bass, 1995, p.11). 'Leader', on the other hand, has been noted as far back as 1300.

2.5.1 Definitions

Hughes et al. (1995) surveyed a selection of definitions, pointing out that differing definitions have led to researchers exploring quite different aspects of leadership. There is no single 'correct' definition of leadership, but the variety of definitions allows for an appreciation of a range of factors.

Influence is an important element in several definitions.[11] For Northouse, leadership is 'a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal' (2015, p.6). Among others, Hersey et al. also highlight the component of influence: 'leadership is the process of influencing the activities of an individual or a group in efforts toward goal achievement in a given situation' (2001, p.79).

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[9] See also Fry (2003).

[10] It is also worth noting the work of Ben-Hur & Jonsen (2012) in this regard.

[11] Although Blom and Alvesson express caution on overplaying the significance of 'influence': they argue that most social interaction involves influence so to say that leadership is influence is not saying much (2015, p.482)! More is needed.

Gardner's (1995, p.6) description of leaders as 'individuals who significantly influence the thoughts, behaviors and/or feelings of others' allows him to distinguish between direct leaders, such as Churchill, and indirect leaders, such as Einstein, whose influence was exercised through his ideas. Leadership may be exercised by word and/or personal example.

Burns uses the language of *mobilization* rather than influence and notes that the goals to be realised are not simply those of the leader. He sees leadership as:

> The reciprocal process of mobilizing, by persons with certain motives and values, various economic, political, and other resources, in a context of competition and conflict, in order to realize goals independently or mutually held by both leaders and followers (1978, p.425).

Among those who have considered the role of the group, Adair proposed a 'three circles model' of leadership (2009, p.loc. 574): the three (interlocking) circles consist of 'task needs', 'team maintenance needs' and 'individual needs'.

2.5.2 Definitions from a Christian perspective

Blackaby and Blackaby survey several definitions from both inside and outside the Church before offering their definition of spiritual leadership as 'moving people on to God's agenda' (2001, p.20). Starling highlights both the element of intentionality and the concept of a common goal (2014, p.9): good leadership is not an end in itself, but points beyond itself and promotes interests that go beyond its own (2014, p.3). Lawrence (2004, p.41) echoes the common theme of influence. Like Starling, he cautions that Christian leadership is not intended to be an end in itself and that good leadership will not necessarily lead to church growth, but claims that 'leadership is a key factor in the spread of the gospel' (2004, p.11).

Banks and Ledbetter offer a comprehensive definition that proposes leadership not simply as influence but also as empowerment. They acknowledge that leadership may be either good or bad and offer their suggestion as to what makes leadership specifically Christian:

> In sum, then, leadership involves a person, group, or organization who shows the way in an area of life - whether in the short- or the long-term - and in doing so both influences and empowers enough people to bring about change in that area. Such

> leadership may be good or bad depending on the leader's style and the content of what the leader is advocating. From a Christian point of view, it is only when the direction and the method are in line with God's purposes, character and ways of operating that godly leadership takes place (2006, p.loc.150).

Reaching a definition, then, requires consideration of the relationship between the leader and the group of followers, the nature and means of the leader's influence, and of the establishment of the goal for which leadership is exercised. For the purposes of this research a leader will be regarded as someone who is intentionally influencing a group towards an agreed and beneficial goal.

2.6 Voices of caution

While leadership has seen an unquestionable surge of interest in recent decades, there have also been voices of caution.

2.6.1 Critique of the leadership industry

The rapidly growing interest in leadership has been accompanied by a growing leadership industry as organisations seek ways in which to develop leaders. Barbara Kellerman, a leadership insider, has issued a challenge to this growing industry, critiquing its 'leader-centrism' with its implication that those who don't lead don't amount to much (2012, p.156). It is not enough to focus only on the leader at a time when other factors, such as the rise of the follower, have gained significance and leaders have less power than previously. Kellerman accuses the industry of being 'self-satisfied, self-perpetuating, and poorly policed' (2012, p.168).

2.6.2 Christian voices

Trueman (in Starling, 2014, p.loc.33) suggests that such things as management theory and 'the emergence of the celebrity CEO' have contributed to how the evangelical Church has understood leadership. While accepting that Christian leaders can learn from wider aspects of leadership practice, he cautions that Scripture must determine Christian notions of leadership.

Similarly, Starling challenges the Christian fixation with the subject, both warning about the tendency to swallow the secular concepts surrounding leadership and attempting to

trace what he sees as a more biblically-faithful concept. He notes that for all the talk of 'leadership' in Christian circles, there are surprisingly few explicit mentions of the terms *leader* and *leadership* in the biblical text, although he does acknowledge the existence of biblical metaphors that are clearly leadership-related (2014, p.3).

But 'hardly' is not never and Tidball (2008, p.171) has noted that the New Testament is unembarrassed about making use of a secular term to describe church leaders. He argues that whatever degree of mutuality may mark the ministry of the church, 'there is still a need and a place for leaders to direct the church humbly, faithfully and persuasively'.

Similarly, Bartlett (in Forney, 2008) notes that Paul and other early Christian writers drew on the language of the outside world, not just on Scripture, when they attempted to understand leadership. He cautions against attempting simply to duplicate the early church on the one hand, but also against simply drawing on 'the latest thing' on leadership while ignoring any potential contribution from the Bible.

2.7 The making of a leader

If theories and definitions of leaders and leadership are diverse and complex, how is the process of becoming a leader to be understood? The answer to this question will have a bearing on the research question.

2.7.1 Are leaders born or made?

Understanding how a leader comes to be a leader presupposes an answer to the long-standing and frequently-posed question of whether leaders are born or made. Barling (2014) reports that a Google search of the question resulted in over 37,000,000 results! If leaders are simply born, genetically equipped with 'the right stuff' that marks them out from the rest of humanity, there may be little to be gained by exploring questions of how they might develop.

Bennis and Nanus were keen to downplay the idea of innate leadership, arguing that significant components of leadership can be learned and most people can be taught: 'nurture is far more important than nature in determining who becomes a successful leader' (2007, p.207). Bennis dismissed as 'the most dangerous leadership myth' the idea of a genetic factor to leadership, asserting that 'leaders are made rather than born. And

the way we become leaders is by learning about leadership through life and job experiences, not with university degrees' (1999, p.163).

However, not everyone agrees that leadership may be reduced to something to be learned: 'it seems obvious that leaders are born different from their followers. It is not simply a matter of learning to lead' (Cawthon, 1996).

Kirkpatrick and Locke claim evidence that successful leaders possess certain significant core traits and that they are not like other people. Traits on which leaders differ from non-leaders include drive, the desire to lead and honesty/integrity. However they suggest that traits alone are insufficient for success: they are a precondition, endowing some people with the potential for leadership. They conclude that:

> Regardless of whether leaders are born or made, it is unequivocally clear that leaders are not like other people. Leaders do not have to be great men or women by being intellectual geniuses or omniscient prophets to succeed, but they do need to have the "right stuff" and this stuff is not equally present in all people (1995, p.loc.2498).

A study of male twins (Arvey et al., 2006) demonstrated that 30% of the variance in leadership role occupancy could be accounted for by genetics. A similar result was found in a sample of female twins: 'Results indicated that 32% of the variance in leadership role occupancy was associated with heritability' (Arvey et al., 2007). Even if the genetic component is no more than a *predisposition* to leadership, it appears that 'leadership is at least partially born into leaders' (Avolio & Luthans, 2006, p.56).

However, experience matters:

> Whatever genetic endowment, whatever home life, however good the education, a future executive does not walk into a corporation knowing how to sell turbine generators to the Chinese' (McCall et al., 1988, p.3).

2.7.2 Learning from experience

The way in which the genetic predisposition interacts with the emerging leader's environment is significant.

Barling noted the contribution of several factors: 'The family environment, the non-family environment, and genetic factors all influence who attains a leadership role and

how they behave as leaders' (2014, p.143).[12] In non-theological terms, much of this might be termed 'accidents of birth'!

Where leaders develop, these may be construed positively, but does it mean that the dice are heavily loaded against others who are born into the 'wrong' gender, ethnicity, or social class? Are they less likely to encounter the influences and opportunities that might contribute to their becoming leaders? To take the issue of gender, Ely at al. report that despite the fact that 'for at least a quarter of a century, women have been entering the professional and managerial ranks of U.S. corporations at about the same rate as men' nonetheless they continue to be underrepresented in senior positions (2011, p.474).

Davis and Maldonado explored the experience of several African American women (who are likely to find themselves on the receiving end of both racism and sexism) in Higher Education:

> In spite of the barriers they encountered, these women perform skillfully in an environment where inequities, negative assumptions and doubts are prevalent. Even through adversity, they carry out their responsibilities but often in an atmosphere where they constantly have to prove themselves (2015, p.48).

Arvey et al. (2007) noted several potential developmental influences including educational experiences, religious experiences, family members, experience of loss and experience of unexpected opportunity while Toor and Ofori (2008) discussed the contribution of significant individuals and significant events in the shaping of emerging leaders.

McCall et al. (1988) proposed that the development of a leader/manager depends partly on raw talent 'but also on the experiences one has and what one does with them' (p.5).[13] They broadly categorised these experiences as assignments, bosses (good, bad and flawed), and hardships. McCall, who later added a fourth category of experiences to which he gave the broad title of 'other events', including personal experiences gleaned

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[12] While recognizing the limitations of a single case study, Barling (2014, pp.124-126) devotes space to exploring the combination of factors in the story of Nelson Mandela, noting how others have pointed to Mandela as evidence that leadership must be innate.

[13] See also the chapter by Yost and Plunkett in Silzer & Dowell, 2010.

outside work, also suggested that not all experiences are equal, reporting that 'the experiences that changed executives were hairpin curves or stomach-turning drops that forced them to look at themselves and their context through a different lens' (McCall, 1998, p.62).

Like McCall et al. Moxley and Pulley (2003) discussed hardship, highlighting six types, including mistakes and failures, career setbacks, racial injustice. Hardships are inevitable but must be seen as opportunities for resilience and learning. Effective leaders know how to acknowledge the impact of the hardship and then move beyond it. In terms that echo Bennis and Thomas's description of crucibles and adaptive capacity, Gonzales wrote that 'flexibility is one of the lessons taught by hardship experiences' (2010, p.54). She noted the work of several researchers who have suggested that there are formative leadership experiences that deeply impact leaders and how they practise their leadership.

Discussion of shaping experiences includes terms such as 'trigger moments' (Avolio & Luthans, 2006), 'Leadership Formative Experiences' (Janson, 2008), 'momentous events' (Olivares, 2011), 'defining moments' (Badaracco, 1997, 2006) and 'catalytic moments (Horowitz & Van Eeden, 2015).

In summary, there is evidence that leaders are both born and made. Whatever a leader may inherit at birth, the experiences of life play a significant role in completing the leader's development. Some of these experiences have been variously described by terms such as 'defining moments', or 'catalytic moments'.

2.7.2.1 The crucible

The specific term that has been chosen to frame the exploration of leaders' journeys in this thesis is that coined by Bennis and Thomas (2002): 'crucibles'. While another term might have been used, the vivid metaphor of the 'crucible', with its inherent implications of testing, transformation, and shaping, is appropriate in discussing the formative experiences of Christian leaders.

For Bennis and Thomas, a leadership crucible is 'a transformative experience from which a person extracts his or her "gold": a new or altered sense of identity' (Thomas, 2008, p.5); it is 'an event or experience that tests and transforms a person' (Bennis, 2010, p.199).

The term was coined in what began as a study of how era influences leadership but became something more, with its findings on how leaders are able to make meaning from difficult events. Bennis and Thomas had interviewed two groups of leaders: one younger (the 'Geeks' of the digital era) and the other more mature (the 'Geezers' of the analogue era). While several era-based distinctions were identified, Bennis and Thomas reported that 'every leader in our study, young or old, had undergone at least one intense transformational experience'.

These 'crucibles', as they came to be known, were varied. For some the crucible may have been the experience of being mentored, for others it may have involved the responsibility of leading in wartime. While the term arguably conjures images of painful experiences, and some of the experiences encountered in the interviews were harsh, Bennis and Thomas suggested that 'the crucible need not be a horrendous ordeal' (2002, p.15).

Since crucibles are personal experiences, the term is quite elastic. Crucibles vary in their nature, but all crucibles are places where essential questions are asked. 'Crucibles are, above all, places or experiences from which one extracts meaning, meaning that leads to new definitions of self and new competencies that better prepare one for the next crucible' (p.99). Crucibles always offer a prize and always carry a chance of failure:

> A crucible is a tipping point where new identities are weighed, where values are examined and strengthened or replaced, and where one's judgment and other abilities are honed. It is an incubator for new insights and a new conception of oneself (p.106).

The ability of a leader to find and integrate meaning in new experiences is described as 'adaptive capacity'. Bennis and Thomas argue that too much prominence has been given to traits in the study of leadership: 'More often, success … emerges as a result of an individual's ability to adapt to a crisis or a challenge … ' (p.91). While it is 'the essential competence' of leadership, adaptive capacity is also the mark of anyone who lives well in the face of challenges. Adaptive capacity means that those who face crucibles are neither stuck in them nor defined by them: they learn lessons. Adaptive capacity includes certain critical skills, such as the ability to understand context and the ability to seize opportunities.

One could legitimately ask whether by highlighting adaptive capacity and its component parts Bennis and Thomas have identified their own set of traits! Is a leader born with

adaptive capacity, or at least with a predisposition to cultivate it? Has the focus of the nature/nurture question simply been shifted?

Thomas' further work (2008) led him to define three types of crucible. The first, 'new territory', often relates to the early stage of a career and involves facing the new and the unknown; the second, 'reversal', more often located in the middle of a career, may involve loss or failure; the third, 'suspension', involves reflection or contemplation. Each of the three types of crucible confronts the leader with particular challenges. All test the leader's adaptive capacity and resilience.

Thomas argues that crucibles differ from life stages[14] which, he suggests, tend to be gradual, even if those stages can be stressful or tumultuous. 'Crucibles are more like trials or tests that corner individuals and force them to answer questions about who they are and what is really important to them' (2008, p.5). However one wonders if Thomas' crucibles are always clearly distinguishable from the adult crises discussed by the Whiteheads (Whitehead & Whitehead, 1995a), or Levinson's culminating events (Levinson, 1975).

Examples of further research on the theme of crucibles are Reitzel (2004) who explored the lived crucible experiences of several 'level five' leaders,[15] and Hinge (2013) who explored the influence of crucibles on the development of leadership capability among community leaders in New Zealand.

On the other hand, Allio (2003) is not convinced by the concept, asking whether the crucible is actually a crock-pot and suggesting that a leader evolves through a series of experiences rather than through a 'singular epiphany' (Allio, 2015).

A study by Paterson and Delight (2014) provided partial support for Thomas' contention that crucible experiences are essential for the development of 'great' leaders: some interviewees reported the influence of significant and challenging experiences. But

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[14] See, for example, Whitehead and Whitehead (1995a) who build on Erikson's work on adult development concepts.

[15] Collins, J., 2001. *Good to Great.* Random House.

there was evidence that other learning experiences 'more akin to a gradual evolution' also had a role to play.

2.7.2.2 Resilience

Bennis and Thomas acknowledged that not everyone emerges successfully from their crucible and their study only dealt with people who had emerged stronger than before (2002, p.101). As already noted, what they called *adaptive capacity* was key. It is 'the defining competence of everyone who retains his or her ability to live well despite life's changes and losses' (p.92). Other writers have discussed the quality of resilience.

The study of psychological resilience attempts to understand why some individuals are able to withstand, or even thrive on, the pressure that they experience. Fletcher and Sarkar (2013) note that most definitions of resilience incorporate the core concepts of adversity and adaptation. Rutter proposed that 'resilience can be defined as reduced vulnerability to environmental risk experiences, the overcoming of a stress or adversity, or a relatively good outcome despite risk experiences' (2012, p.336).

Avolio and Luthans also discussed 'resiliency' as one component of a leader's 'psychological capital'. Resiliency enables positive adaptation in hardship. It is the 'bounce back' sometimes observed in people who have experienced difficulty. 'Unquestioning self-awareness, belief in oneself and the mission, and the ability to adapt over time, are all part of the authentic leader's psychological capital of resiliency' (2006, p.156).

2.7.2.3 Summary

Bennis and Thomas' crucible concept may be located within the wider context of the lessons of experience that contribute to a leader's development. Key factors in successful navigation of crucibles are resilience and adaptive capacity.

The term will be used in this research especially for its concepts of testing and shaping, or transformation.

2.8 Christian leadership development

The specific concern of this thesis, namely the shaping of Christian leaders, appears to be somewhat neglected in the literature. McKenna et al. (2007) drew attention to the

lack of research aimed specifically at exploring factors related to the development of pastoral leaders. In personal correspondence, one of McKenna's colleagues (Yost, 2017) told me that he was unaware of much specific similar research in subsequent years. A search of recent volumes of *Practical Theology*, *The Journal of Contemporary Religion*, and *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* revealed relatively little on the subjects of leaders and leadership, not to mention the specific subject of leader development. While the *Journal of Religious Leadership* contained little on the explicit question of how leaders are shaped, some of its articles explore related questions, such as woundedness (Goodman, 2007) and resilience (Forney, 2010).

McKenna and his colleagues noted that issues such as pastoral burnout have been explored, and suggest – with some merit - that the literature on burnout can help provide a framework for reflection on pastoral development insofar as it highlights some of the challenges inherent in pastoral work: crucibles that many leaders need to negotiate in their development.

2.8.1 Burnout and resilience

In discussions of burnout, Maslach's three elements of burnout are often referenced: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach et al., 2006). Among factors contributing to clergy burnout[16] are high expectations and the risk often experienced by those who work with people who have suffered trauma (Jackson-Jordan, 2013).[17] Chandler (2009, p.273) highlighted 'inordinate ministerial demands' that drain energy and impair effectiveness. Notably, but perhaps unsurprisingly, her research highlighted the link between 'spiritual dryness' and burnout.

Forney (2010) observed the particular stress points faced by clergy within a call to ministry: these include 'receiving the primary call to ministry, attending an institution of

[16] Interestingly, in his research on Anglican clergy in England and Wales, Randall (2013, p.184) observed that 'younger clergy are more prone to burnout': he proposes that 'the first priority for the provision of personnel and pastoral support for clergy should be those in their first ten years of ministry' (p.186).

[17] See also the work of Jill Hendron in her exploration of the effect of secondary trauma in Church of Ireland clergy (2013).

theological education, getting the first call to pastoral ministry, and the acutely adverse experiences encountered in living out the call' (2010, p.9).

Both Chandler (2009) and Francis et al. (2013) explored several potential coping strategies. None of the five measures explored by Francis et al. in their work with American Presbyterians (study leave, sabbaticals, ministry mentors, spiritual directors, and ministry peer groups) appeared to predict lower levels of exhaustion, but two (study leave and ministry mentors) predicted a slight increase in satisfaction. Chandler concluded that 'pastors, by virtue of their calling, need to nurture an ongoing and renewing relationship with God to maintain life balance, reduce stress, and avoid burnout' (2009, p.284).

Meek et al. (2003) noted the existence of studies on negative aspects of pastoral life, including burnout. While they acknowledge that research into negative themes[18] can be 'helpful in identifying challenges facing clergy' (2003, p.340), they chose to explore factors in healthy functioning. In reporting the results of two studies they highlighted themes of intentionality (in terms of balance and connectedness) and the importance of God, which included the leader's sense of calling, the practice of spiritual disciplines and self-awareness and the nature of God.

Forney (2010) acknowledged the value of leadership skills in helping develop resilience but also suggested the cultivation of certain 'assets' such developing a balance between internal and external loci of control, and an understanding and use of pain.

Burns et al. (2013) reported several significant factors in enabling 'pastoral resilience': spiritual formation, self-care, emotional and cultural intelligence, marriage and family, and what they called leadership poetry and plumbing. While not claiming to have discovered the 'holy grail' of pastoral survival, they propose that 'an understanding of these themes, and an intentional evaluation of life and ministry through them, will greatly affect the health and resilience of pastors and other types of ministry leaders' (2013, p.249).

[18] They also refer to studies on impairment and misconduct.

2.8.2 Leader development

To return to the original question of pastoral leader development, McKenna et al.'s contribution has drawn attention to events and experiences that contribute to clergy development. These were classified using a five-part taxonomy that included 'setting the stage', transitions, 'leading in the trenches' (which included such things as setbacks and mistakes) and the part played by other people (including role models, both good and bad). McKenna and his colleagues also discussed 'learning agility' (2007a), the situational and personal factors that facilitate the capture of the lessons of experience.[19] Situational factors included the ability to draw on God and others, while personal factors included a learning focus, humility, and self-awareness.

Clinton (1988) had previously described a detailed model of Christian leader development.[20] His theory of leadership development proposes that God develops a leader over a lifetime and that three essential elements interact in this: processing, (anything that produces a leadership lesson), time, and leader response. A key concept in Clinton's theory is the timeline: while each leader's timeline is unique, it is possible to trace general patterns. Each phase of the timeline is marked by different kinds of process items and Clinton notes specific boundary events between phases.

In the first three phases the emphasis is less on what God is doing *through* the leader and more on what God is doing *in* the leader. However, 'God does not stop working on character after moving someone into leadership' (1988, pp.154-155). Clinton describes God's working to deepen the leader's character in terms of a 'maturity cluster' of processing items. These include what he terms 'isolation', which occurs when 'a leader is separated from normal involvement, yet in the context in which ministry has been occurring, usually for an extended time, and experiences some aspect of God in a new or deeper way' (1988, p.161). Not dissimilar is Turner and Fike's discussion (2103) of the potential of sabbatical, comprising a 'neutral zone' where the leader is removed from

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[19] Note the similarity with the discussion in Bennis and Thomas of 'adaptive capacity'.

[20] Clinton referred to 'leadership emergence' (2003, 2005), a term that was also used by Cenac (2010), although with a different emphasis (p.126), in her attempt to map a path through the born/made conundrum.

the work and ministry context (p.101), to create an environment where both personal growth and leadership development may be accelerated.

The development of a leader should be viewed as part of the leader's faith development. Hagberg and Guelich (1989) explored six stages of spiritual development in the life of faith. These were the recognition of God, the life of discipleship, the productive life, the journey inward, the journey outward, and the life of love. Of particular interest in the context of the study of 'crucible' experiences is what they referred to as 'The Wall', part of the journey inward (stage 4) that confronts an individual with the need to surrender to God's will (p.114). The Wall is difficult to describe, but there is a 'deep sense' that God is at work.[21]

Huizing (2010) referred to the work of McKenna et al. and of Hagberg and Guelich in his discussion of seasons of 'ecclesial leadership'. He explored four seasons: the call, the formation, the role, and the praxis, suggesting that while the idea of four seasons fits neatly into our concept of seasons, we need not limit the ecclesial seasons to four. He also noted the cyclical nature of seasons, claiming that 'to follow the paradigm suggested is to follow a life-long learning experience' (p.89).

2.9 Summary

This chapter has discussed the growing interest in leadership and noted the complexity involved in attempting to define the concept. It has briefly mentioned several theories of leadership, noted some definitions and surveyed some of the discussion on how leaders are not simply born, but are formed by various experiences, such as crucibles. Interest in leadership from a specifically Christian perspective parallels the wider interest, although there is discussion about how Christian leadership relates to secular forms. Christian literature offers its contributions to the definitions of leadership and the ways in which leaders are shaped by experience, although this issue appears not to have received adequate treatment in academic literature thus far.

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[21] It is also interesting to note the five conversions discussed by Kretzschmar in her work on moral formation: namely conversion of 'the *head,* the *heart,* the *will, relationships* and *actions*' (2007, p.28).

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY AND METHOD

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter has proposed that leaders are both born and made and that the experiences of life thus play an important role in a leader's formation. 'Crucibles' is one term that has been used to describe a set of such experiences. The aim of the research has been to explore these experiences in the development of Christian leaders, and this has been done by borrowing from the disciplines of qualitative research and practical theology.

This chapter will discuss the methodology undergirding the research.

3.2 Research question

I explored this subject as something more than an interested observer in that I have spent a significant part of the past quarter century actively involved in vocational Christian leadership, leading churches in Switzerland and Northern Ireland. My involvement in leadership has brought its own ups and downs with a few crucible experiences along the way, and has perhaps inevitably created a sensitivity towards other leaders who are experiencing challenges. This, along with biblical studies and reading on leadership, has helped develop a particular interest in exploring how leaders are shaped along the course of their leadership journey.

The research question was: What is the significance of crucible experiences in the development of Christian leaders? Fourteen leaders participated in the research and the method used to explore this question was semi-structured qualitative interviewing.

3.3 Qualitative Methodology

A qualitative approach, with its emphasis on 'description, interpretation and understanding' (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p.loc.943) was appropriate, since the aim of the research was to explore the lived experience of a set of leaders rather than to measure the frequency of a particular experience.

3.3.1 Qualitative research

The differences between qualitative and quantitative camps have been well rehearsed (Seidman, 2006, pp.7-8; Denscombe, 2007, p.247ff.; Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p.loc.890ff.). Simply put, while quantitative research focuses on facts, deals with numbers, and leads to quantifiable and generalizable conclusions, qualitative work deals with words or images (Denscombe, 2007, p.248), aims to understand individuals' perceptions of experiences (Bell, 1987, 2010, p.5), and to explore how people inhabit the social world (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p.loc.636).

Qualitative research is predicated on the value of people's stories and their validity as a source of knowledge (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p.loc.806). Seidman (2006, p.8) notes that 'recounting narratives of experience has been the major way … that humans have made sense of their experience'.

However, qualitative research must not be thought of as merely telling stories. Mason (2002, pp.7-8) argues that research should be carried out 'systematically and rigorously', it should require the researcher to seek to understand their own role in the investigation, it 'should produce *explanations* or arguments, rather than *claiming* to offer mere descriptions', and those explanations and arguments should have some 'demonstrable wider resonance'. Some of the challenges with regard to validity will be addressed at the end of this section.

3.3.2 Hermeneutic phenomenology

One particular approach to qualitative research is Hermeneutic Phenomenology (Swinton & Mowat, 2006).

3.3.2.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology is 'a philosophy of experience that attempts to understand the ways in which meaning is constructed in and through human experience' (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p.loc.1938). Its roots lie in the philosophical phenomenology of Husserl and his desire to capture the essence of experience by examining it 'in its own terms' (Smith et al., 2009, p.12). Phenomenology aims for thorough description in order to determine what an experience means to an individual.

Denscombe (2007, p.75) highlights the contrast with positivistic concerns with measurement and objectivity. While there are different types of phenomenology, all of them are concerned with experience, with life in the everyday world and with attempting to see through the eyes of others.

A major division between two main families of phenomenology should be noted. The first, transcendental phenomenology, is more philosophically rooted and is concerned with the essence of an experience; the second, existential phenomenology, is concerned to describe and interpret the experience (Denscombe, 2007; King and Horrocks, 2010). The issue of interpretation leads to a second component of hermeneutic phenomenology.

3.3.2.2 Hermeneutics

Drawn originally from the world of biblical studies, the science of hermeneutics has subsequently been applied more widely to other texts, and here is applied to the interpretation of phenomenological data.

Smith et al. argue that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) calls for the researcher to engage in a double hermeneutic (2009, p.3). Not only is the participant attempting to interpret her experience, but the analyst is also attempting to interpret the participant's interpretation.[22] The researcher is both standing in the participant's shoes and attempting to stand alongside, viewing the phenomenon from a different angle, 'attempting to understand, both in the sense of "trying to see what it is like for someone" and in the sense of "analysing, illuminating, and making sense of something"' (2009, p.36).

This means that, far from being an impartial, objective observer, the researcher is implicated in the construction of the themes that emerge from the research. Drawing on the work of Gadamer, Swinton and Mowat argue that:

> Themes do not necessarily represent the experience as initially interpreted and understood by the person themselves, but are a constructive product of the fusion of

[22] In reality a triple hermeneutic is actually in play as the reader makes sense of the researcher's analysis (Smith et al., 2009, p.109).

> the researcher's horizons with those of the participants as together they embark upon the quest for meaning and understanding (2006, p.loc.2146).

To bring phenomenology and hermeneutics together then is to seek 'a rich description of the experience and a necessary interpretative perspective on lived experience' (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p.loc.1996).

3.3.2.3 Ideography

One further element that needs to be mentioned is ideography (Smith et al., 2009).

In contrast with nomothetic knowledge and its claims that relate to groups or the population at large, 'establishing general laws of human behaviour' (Smith et al., 2009, p.29), ideography 'presumes that meaningful knowledge can be discovered in unique, non-replicable experiences' (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p.loc.875).

The difference between nomothetic and ideographic methods is an important feature of the difference between quantitative and qualitative methods and raises significant questions of validity and generalizability. Nomothetic claims must meet the scientific criteria of being falsifiable, replicable and generalizable (Swinton & Mowat, 2009, p.loc.832). On the other hand, ideography's emphasis on a particular experience makes generalization more difficult; not that it is impossible, but it calls for a cautious approach. As Smith states, 'idiography [sic] does not eschew generalizations, but rather prescribes a different way of establishing those generalizations … It locates them in the particular, and hence develops them more cautiously' (2009, p.29).

3.3.3 Issues of validity

The issue of generalizability is one of the main challenges of qualitative phenomenological research. The researcher must walk a fine line: the fact that the research is often drawn from a specific context is what gives it its value, and generalization can lead to that original context being lost from view (Flick, 2015 p.240).

In place of generalization, qualitative researchers aim for resonance:

> Perhaps the doubts over generalizability can be alleviated if we think in terms of *identification* and *resonance*. While the findings of qualitative research studies may not be immediately transferable to other contexts, there is a sense in which qualitative research would resonate with the experiences of others in similar circumstances. This resonance

> should invoke a sense of identification with those who share something of the experience (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p.loc.955-6).

The qualitative researcher must therefore aim to deliver a rich description of experience without which such resonance is difficult to accomplish.

This is not the only issue surrounding the reliability and validity of qualitative research. Both Denscombe (2007) and Mason (2002) call for scientific rigour and warn against research that fails to get beyond description to analysis and explanation. It is the nature of phenomenology, with its desire to capture the essence of 'the things themselves' that leaves it open to this pitfall. Mason contends 'that all qualitative research should be formulated around an intellectual puzzle – that is, something which the researcher wishes to explain' (2002, p.7). She goes on to argue that descriptions and explorations cannot be neutral: researchers need to be explicit about the logic they are using in the arguments they inevitably produce.

Clearly a different set of criteria needs to be applied from those applied to quantitative research. Mason (2002, p.38) acknowledges that the usual 'scientific' measures of validity, generalizability and reliability have not always been welcomed in qualitative research, but is loathe to reject the 'broad ideas' that lie behind some of the criteria. Validity, then, means that the researcher is observing what they claim to be observing; generalizability means that the researcher is able to make a wider claim based on their work; reliability refers to the accuracy of methods and techniques.

Swinton and Mowat propose *trustworthiness* as a way of defining rigour. Following Guba and Lincoln (1994) they note the significance of *credibility, auditability* and *fittingness*. They develop these criteria by proposing (p.loc.2224) that 'credibility emerges from the richness of the research data and its ability to resonate with others who have been through experiences similar to the ones being described'. *Auditability* requires the recording of a recognisable 'audit trail' that could be followed by another researcher; to be *fitting* means that the final result should be a recognisable description of the essence of the experience being researched.

For their part, Smith et al. (2009, pp.180-183) note four principles suggested by Lucy Yardley:

1. Sensitivity to context. Smith et al. suggest that in the field of Integrated Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) this means giving space to the participants' voices, by means of verbatim extracts from the data.
2. Commitment and rigour, which have implications for the attentiveness paid to the participant during the process, the quality of the interview and the completeness of the analysis.
3. Transparency and coherence, including clarity about how the research was conducted.
4. Impact and importance. '[Yardley] makes the important point that however well a piece of research is conducted, a test of its real validity lies in whether it tells the reader something interesting, important or useful' (2009, p.183).

3.3.4 Qualitative interviewing

Interviewing is arguably the most suitable approach when the researcher needs to be able to glean knowledge beyond the merely factual. Interviews provide the researcher with access to people's inner lives in a way that other methods such as observation cannot (Sensing, 2011, p.103), and have the ability to generate a depth of information; however they can be time-consuming, not least in the amount of time that is needed for adequate analysis of data (Denscombe, 2007, pp.202-3). Interviewing can also appear deceptively easy, given that we live in an interview culture where we are frequently exposed to all kinds of interviews.

A further difficulty lies in the fact that interviews have certain similarities with conversations: however, there are also important differences. For example, the interviewer has a clear agenda for the interview[23] and is in a position of power (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p.loc.1270): an interview is not an equal exchange.

Qualitative interviewing is usually viewed along a scale of formality (Bell, 2010, p.136), ranging from the structured interview, which can end up resembling a questionnaire (Denscombe 2007, p.176), to the unstructured interview, where the interviewer needs to be careful to prevent the interview from becoming little more than an open-ended

[23] Smith's observation is helpful: a qualitative interview is 'a conversation with a purpose' (2009, p.57).

conversation. Semi-structured interviewing allows the researcher to avoid both of these traps and ensure both an appropriate relationship with the participant and the discovery of relevant information (see Mason, 2002, p.67).

The use of an interview guide (King & Horrocks, 2010, p.35) or schedule (Smith et al., 2009, p.58) helps maintain focus while at the same time allowing scope for the participant to develop themes, perhaps even in unexpected directions, something which inevitably calls for a degree of flexibility on the part of the interviewer.

Semi-structured qualitative interviewing, then, appears to be the most appropriate method to gain access to the data required to answer the research question.

The second part of the methodological framework for the research is drawn from the discipline of practical theology.

3.4 Practical theology and theological reflection

As its name self-evidently suggests, the outcomes of practical theology should contribute to the practice and performance of the faith (Cahalan & Mikoski, 2014, p.1). Browning argues that theology as a whole is fundamentally practical and prefers to use the term *strategic practical theology*, or *fully practical theology*, so marking a distinction with descriptive, historical or systematic theology (1996, p.8). Unlike applied theology, which seeks to apply the findings of other theological disciplines to practical situations, practical theology has its starting point in human experience (Swinton & Mowat, 2006; Kinast, 2000). Not that this means that it should be seen in merely pragmatic terms since it should always be driven by the quest to know who God is (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p.loc.593); its basic task is the promotion of faithful discipleship (Nieman & Cahalan, 2008, p.66).

Key to the discipline of practical theology is the practice of theological reflection. While the two are not identical,[24] 'theological reflection is central to, and perhaps even the defining element of, practical theology' (Thompson et al., 2008, p.18). Theological reflection facilitates connections between belief and practice (Thompson et al., 2008,

[24] Although Kinast (1983) suggests that theological reflection is the new pastoral theology.

p.3) and between 'the *theory* of practical theology and the *experience* of practitioners in the field' (Thompson & Pattison, 2005, p.8).

> Theological reflection is an activity that enables people of faith to give an account of the values and traditions that underpin their choices and convictions and deepens their understanding. Theological reflection enables the connections between human dilemmas and divine horizons to be explored, drawing on a wide range of academic disciplines including social sciences, psychotherapeutic and medicinal disciplines and the arts (Graham et al., 2005, pp.5-6).

Various models of reflection have been suggested. Many of them are variations on the pastoral cycle whose roots can be traced to Segundo's liberation theology and Kolb's learning cycle (see Thompson & Pattison, 2005; Green, 2008). After considering five distinct forms of reflection, Kinast concludes that they share a common form that 'begins with the lived experience of those doing the reflection; it correlates this experience with the sources of the Christian tradition; and it draws out the practical implications for Christian living' (2000, p.1).

3.4.1 The Bible and Practical Theology

Practical theologians have noted the surprisingly uncomfortable relationship between the Bible and practical and pastoral theology (Pattison, 2000; Graham et al., 2005). Ballard has argued that those who are involved in reflection need to be properly equipped in their handling of Scripture, suggesting that not enough attention has been paid to the use of the Bible in theological reflection (2011, p.44). As Briggs observes, 'If Christian scripture has practical import for daily life, which surely it does, then it is important that it is not bypassed by practical theology' (2015, p.217).

Nonetheless, there is wide agreement that the Bible (or at least the Christian tradition) belongs among the conversation partners at the table of theological reflection. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral sets Scripture alongside tradition, experience and reason (Osmer, 2014, p.84). But is theological reflection a partnership of equals? Does the Bible trump all other sources or does the Christian tradition also require revision (see Graham et al., 2005, p.168)? Does privileging Scripture get in the way of authentic theological reflection?

Clearly, one's view of the nature of the Bible will inevitably affect the Bible's role in the conversation.

3.4.2 Evangelicals and theological reflection

If some writers from within the evangelical[25] tradition have been slow to embrace the discipline of theological reflection, at least part of the reason for their reticence may be located in the question of how the Bible is to be viewed (Busby, 2008, p.72). Those evangelicals who are particularly concerned to uphold a strong view of the Bible's authority will be wary of methods of reflection that call for the privileged position of the Bible to be suspended. As Tidball notes, 'evangelicals remain uneasy with an approach to pastoral practice which uses the Bible but merely as one of a number of resources to which one might turn without giving it any sense of priority' (2008b, p.200).

Ward expresses a fairly conventional evangelical view when he states categorically that 'the authority of the Bible is often the first claim evangelical believers want to make about the Bible' (2009, p.127). He understands the phrase as a shorthand way of describing 'the authority of God as he speaks through Scripture' (p.128). Scripture has no authority of its own: its authority derives from and depends on the authority of God and from the way God presents himself through Scripture.

Briggs, however, suggests that phrases referring to the authority of the Bible appear to be so familiar that not much thought is given to what they actually mean (2011, p.91). Reasons for asking what exactly is meant by the authority of the Bible have typically fallen into one of two categories: the first focussing on the *nature* of the Bible and the second on its *function*. Briggs shifts the discussion to focus on understanding how the Bible *applies*: the way in which we bridge the gap between the Bible and ourselves as readers (2011, p.96). The Bible is more than a source of ethical information: it reveals God.

Busby has suggested the following definition of evangelical theological reflection:

> The lifelong, restless, yet Spirit-guided exploration of selected personal and ministry experiences for the purposes of both discerning God's character/plans and discovering

[25] See section 4.2 for more on evangelicalism.

> wise ministry principles. This learning experience takes place within an authentic biblical community, yet, under the authority of Scripture (2008, p.78).

3.4.3 Using the Bible

Roger Walton (2002, 2003) explored how the Bible and the tradition were used in three theological institutions, identifying a typology that comprised seven distinct ways of using the Bible and Christian tradition in theological reflection. These ranged from a simple exercise in 'links and associations', through exploration of a theological theme to a form of mutual critique – 'both a critique of the practice by theology and a critique of theology by practice and experience' (2002, p.167).

Of particular interest for this research is what Walton describes as 'resonance and analogy', a form of reflection where an individual understands their experience to be analogous to a biblical story and this becomes the basis for an exploration of the relationship between experience and theology. Such an exercise calls for caution as it can easily fall prey to superficiality and the imposition of pre-formed ideas: 'Trivialization of Scripture is so common that we usually do not even recognize when we are doing it' (Moberly, 2003, p.189).

The analysis chapter will reflect theologically on the themes that have emerged from the data, seeking to '[bring] experience into conversation with the wisdom of the Christian heritage' (Killen and DeBeer 2007, p.127).

Or, as Anderson puts it:

> Weaving the human and divine enables us to hear our own stories retold with clarity and new possibility. And when we hear our own stories retold in relation to a larger and deeper narrative, our lives are transformed in the telling (2005, p.203).

The biblical characters, passages and themes used in the reflection in chapter 6 have been chosen for the ways in which they echo or throw light on themes emerging from the research.

3.5 Ethical issues

The issue of ethical research has been thoroughly covered in the literature (see, for example, Bryman, 2016, p.125; Flick, 2015, p.32; King & Horrocks, 2010, p.108; Mason,

2002, pp.80-81; Sensing, 2011, p.34; Silverman, 2013, p.161; Smith et al., 2009, p.53), and guidelines are readily available from various professional bodies.[26] Broadly speaking, researchers must operate on the basis of respect for the particpants, involving a commitment to their autonomy and protection; the principle of beneficence, including the principle of causing no harm; and with a commitment to justice, whereby the risks and benefits of the resarch are fairly shared.

Ethical approval for this project was sought and granted by the University of Chester.

3.5.1 Risk

Given that the participants were recognised leaders in churches or mission organisations, it was unlikely that any of them would fall into an 'at risk' category. If there were any risk it would be in relation to the recall of painful and difficult experiences that had not yet been adequately dealt with. Had any such situation arisen, it would have been necessary to suggest professional pastoral help while resisting the temptation to turn the interview into a counselling session (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p.loc.1292). Nonetheless, because of the nature of the research topic, there were times when the line between qualitative interviewing and amateur counselling was at risk of being blurred.[27]

However, there were no instances of significant distress during the interviews, even when leaders were discussing painful episodes.

3.5.2 Benefit

The most immediate value was for the participants, as they were able to engage in a guided review of their own story. Two participants commented on this: one mentioned

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[26] For example, see the list suggested in Fox et al., 2007, p.101.

[27] In one interview I had to change tack when the participant commented that I was almost getting into areas of counselling. In another I found it difficult not to offer an alternative, more encouraging perspective on the participant's crucible.

that the interview had given her new insights into factors that were important in her development; the other commented on how affirming it was to have been listened to.[28]

Beyond this, the research has the potential to be helpful to leaders at various stages in their leadership by providing a framework that allows them to evaluate their own leadership journeys. More experienced leaders may be able to gain insights into their own development while younger leaders may be helped to anticipate some of the experiences they will encounter during their career.

Finally, there may also be value for non-leaders who will gain a greater awareness of what it means to be a leader and an understanding of some of the pressures and challenges involved.

There was no monetary reward for participation, though I felt it was appropriate to offer each participant a copy of a book on leadership.

3.5.3 Relationship with the participants

There was no professional conflict of interest. While I already knew most of the participants, there was no formal professional relationship[29] that could have skewed the information from the interviews.

3.5.4 Consent

The ethical value of respect for persons includes the principle of informed consent. Mason (2002, p.81) discusses the significance of *informed* consent, noting that it may not be possible, or necessary, to go into every detail with the participants. However,

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[28] He made this comment after reading the transcript of his interview. Denscombe (2007, p.203) suggests that interviewing may have a therapeutic value for the participant/informant.

[29] For example, had any of the participants been colleagues reporting to me in a formal professional sense, this could have affected the nature or amount of information they were willing to share.

participants need to be aware of the nature of the research and be able to withdraw from the project at any time.[30]

The nature and procedures of this project, including the projected use of the results, were communicated to the participants along with a letter of welcome. Participants were given details of a complaints procedure, should the need have arisen, and they were asked to return a signed copy of a consent form. In signing the form they were acknowledging that they had understood the contents of an information sheet, that their participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

3.5.5 Confidentiality and anonymity

A commitment was made as far as possible to protect the details of the participants.

The issue of confidentiality is something of a red herring as the goal of the project is to publish a University thesis, which will hardly be confidential (see Smith et al., 2009, p.53). Researchers can, however, offer anonymity.

The identity of the participants has been concealed:[31] pseudonyms have been used in the data and on occasion place names have also been altered. However it is difficult to guarantee that the identity of a participant will remain completely unknown, especially if the participant and his or her story are well known, which is the case with several leaders in this project: withholding a participant's name is no sure guarantee that they will not be identified (King & Horrocks, 2010, p.119). Mason agrees that,

> [to guarantee confidentiality and anonymity] can be quite difficult given the full, rich and personal nature of the data generated from qualitative interviews. Such data can usually be recognised by the interviewee whether or not you attach the interviewee's name to them, and also they may be recognisable to other people (2002, p.80).

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[30] Smith et al. note that this is not as simple as it might sound, distinguishing between permission to withdraw at any point during the collection of data and permission to withdraw at any point before data analysis begins or publication takes place (p.54).

[31] The only person who knows the identity of all of the participants is my wife: I judged that it was important for her to know where I was and with whom while I was conducting interviews.

Even if it were possible to completely conceal a participant's identity, the issue is not always clear-cut: some participants may be more than happy for their names to be associated with a research project. I know that more than one of the participants have voluntarily shared with others the fact that they have been interviewed. Clearly however, the decision to waive their anonymity is their prerogative and not that of the researcher.

Data from the interviews has been stored on a personal laptop computer while printed materials have been kept secure in binders in a private home study.

3.6 Procedure

3.6.1 Sampling

In contrast with quantitative research and its emphasis on representative sampling and the ensuing implications for the generalizability of findings, qualitative researchers tend to prefer purposive sampling whose goal is to work with those participants who are relevant to the research question: sampling is carried out with the goals of the researcher in mind (Bryman, 2016, p.408). As Silverman observes, 'purposive sampling allows us to choose a case because it illustrates some feature or process in which we are interested' (2013, p.148). In the current project, this meant leaders who had experienced crucibles.

The recruitment of participants was based on the untested[32] assumption that most leaders encounter crucible experiences. The assumption was proved largely correct but in retrospect this assumption was something of a leap and the research would have been on more solid methodological foundations had the selection of the participants for interview been preceded by a simple questionnaire.

A second factor in the sampling was the accessibility of the participants, despite Seidman's suggestion that 'the easier the access, the more complicated the interview' (2006, p.40). I opted to work either with leaders whom I already knew, or with leaders to whom it was relatively straightforward to gain access. In the event, I already knew all

[32] The assumption was untested on my part although Bennis and Thomas reported that all of the leaders they surveyed described crucible experiences.

but two of the leaders who agreed to be interviewed; others were known by reputation and we had sufficient points of reference to make contact possible.

The risks of interviewing people whom I already knew included the danger of making assumptions about them or their stories (Seidman, 2006, p.42); on the other hand, where there is already a degree of relationship, it may be easier to establish an atmosphere that facilitates responsiveness. At the end of the day it is the rigour of the findings that should validate the decision.

A further consideration in sampling is a decision on the size of the sample. Obviously there should be enough participants to give a significant insight into the phenomenon being explored: as Mason states, 'the key question to ask is whether your sample provides access to enough data, and with the right focus, to enable you to address your research questions' (2002, p.134). She notes that qualitative research samples are usually small, not least for practical reasons given the amount of time (and money, though not in this case) involved in both generating and analysing data.

In their discussion of the idiographic component of IPA, and its concern with the particular, Smith et al. (2009, p.29) note that IPA tends to use small,[33] purposively-selected samples, 'and may often make very effective use of single case analyses'.

For the purposes of the research, 'leaders' referred to people engaged in vocational Christian leadership, either in a church or in a para-church organization. Most of the leaders interviewed are generally acknowledged to have reached a degree of seniority in their church or ministry organisation: some of them have reached the upper reaches of their denominational structures.

Participants were chosen from within the evangelical tradition (my own), though across more than one denomination.[34] The need for facility of access meant that all but two of the leaders chosen were based in the British Isles. This may, of course, result in some

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[33] The eventual sample size in this project (14 interviews) was probably larger than it needed to be.

[34] As will be suggested in the concluding chapter, further research could be carried out in order to explore the experiences of non-evangelical leaders. It would be of interest to observe any significant differences that may be based on theological assumptions.

limitations to the benefits of the study for a wider audience of leaders, especially in very different cultural settings. The non-British participants are both North American and both have lived in Europe. While cultural differences may be observed in styles and expectations of leaders, the validity of the research is not dependent on uniformity of style.[35]

Several comments on the nature of evangelicalism, not least in the Northern Irish context, are in order and will be addressed in the next chapter.

Given the conservative evangelical constituency from which the participants were drawn, it was likely that there would be more men than women in the group, though care was taken to ensure that there were female participants.[36] In the event, two of the fourteen leaders were women.

It has already been pointed out that the term 'crucible' is somewhat elastic,[37] and can thus be applied to a variety of personal experiences. As mentioned previously, it was assumed that crucibles would be a sufficiently common experience and that leaders would be able to identify at least one. However, two people declined to participate, claiming that they had not experienced anything that could be described as a crucible.[38]

An email was sent to prospective participants. This included a document (see appendix) that outlined the rationale behind the research and explaining how it would proceed if the person agreed to participate. Several leaders declined with the main reason given

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[35] It may also be added that there is a degree of transatlantic cross-fertilisation in leadership ideas, not least in the evangelical world. Several of the participants mentioned ways in which their own journeys had been influenced by American input (although, of course such a term is much too sweeping and ignores the differences, say, between the high powered world of the Willow Creek Association and the more reflective leadership of Eugene Peterson).

[36] See chapter 4, FN 43. Further research could profitably explore whether there is any difference between the typical crucible experiences of women leaders and those of their male counterparts.

[37] However, the elasticity of the term should not be taken to mean that anything and everything is a crucible. A later chapter will discuss the problem of defining the term too widely when a different term, say 'defining moment' could more appropriately be used.

[38] I am inclined to think that this illustrates the problem of defining the term and that, with more explanation the leaders may have responded differently. In one case, the leader was probably also too busy to be able to participate.

being busyness: this was probably unsurprising given the calibre of leader invited to participate.

Fourteen people agreed to be interviewed. They were sent several documents (see appendix):

- a letter of welcome
- a second copy of the participant information sheet
- two copies of a consent form: one to be signed and returned
- a copy of the Evangelical Alliance statement of faith[39]
- a preparatory document to help leaders reflect on their leadership journey ahead of the interview

3.6.2 Interviewing and transcribing

The interviews were semi-structured, in-depth, one-to-one interviews that lasted, for the most part, between two and a half and three hours. While group interviews might have permitted more participants to be involved, it is likely that there would have been less time to explore individual experiences in depth; group interviewing would also have to take account of the interpersonal dynamics within the group which could also have affected the depth of the accounts.

The structure of the interviews had been influenced by Seidman's model of in-depth phenomenological interviewing that involves three interviews with each participant (2006, p.16). He argues that the value of this comes from setting a context, without which it is difficult to explore the meaning of an experience. Seidman's three interviews cover: focussed life-history, details of the experience, and an opportunity for reflection on the meaning of the experience.

I decided against strict adherence to Seidman's model, largely because it is easier to ask a leader to grant one block of time for an interview than to attempt to negotiate three separate times. However I prepared an interview guide that was structured to reflect

[39] This was used as the basis for leaders to self-identify as evangelical.

Seidman's three areas. This was used as a guide and not a detailed template for a structured interview.

Two people were asked to be part of a pilot scheme: in the event their interviews were such a rich source of material that they were included (with permission) alongside the other interviews, and their data included in the analysis. The pilot interviews had allowed me to become accustomed to the technology and the task of interviewing. I was also able to make adjustments to the interview guide, based on the first two interviews.

Some of the interviews proved richer than others in terms of the quality of the material produced and its relevance to the research question. Most challenging were leaders whose answers were short and matter of fact. This may have reflected either the leader's pragmatic personality, or that they had not fully reflected on their experiences. On the other hand some interviews were impressive for the charisma of the leader, the richness of their story or their articulation of lessons learned along the way.

The interviews were conducted over a period of several weeks, starting in October 2014 and concluding in January 2015. They were held in a variety of locations: some in neutral venues, some in my home, and some in the participants' home or office. Three interviews were held using Skype™[40] or Facetime™. In theory these interviews should differ little from face to face interviews, however bandwidth problems meant having to conduct them in audio only.

The interviews were recorded using Livescribe™, software that allows note taking to synchronise with the audio recording. As a precaution, a back up was also made using an iPhone™. During the interviews I also took handwritten notes, which enabled me to write a summary of each interview.

After the majority of the interviews had been completed and summarized, a rough initial summary of main themes was drawn up.

On completion the interviews were transcribed using Transcription F5 Pro™ and each participant received a copy of the transcript of their interview which they were able to

[40] A fourth interview was supplemented by a Skype call as the original session did not have enough time to explore all the relevant material.

review for accuracy: an important factor in the validity of the data.[41] This allowed the participants the opportunity to revisit their own recollection; however it must be recognised that complete accuracy of recall cannot be guaranteed (Bridge & Paller, 2012).

3.6.3 Coding and analysis

As well as the computer copies of the interviews two copies of the completed transcripts were printed off and stored in large ring binders. The interviews were then read several times, and annotated, highlighting significant sections and paying particular attention to descriptions of crucible experiences. I made use of Robert Thomas' three types of crucibles: new territory, reversals and suspensions. This taxonomy will be developed in chapter 5.

Further work was done using MAXQDA™ software which allowed a detailed process of coding to be carried out. A table listing the most frequently occurring codes is included in the results chapter.

3.7 Summary

The methodology undergirding the quest to answer the research question is drawn from two distinct disciplines. First, qualitative phenomenology provided the basis for the semi-structured interviews that sought to explore the experiences of the leaders. Then, drawing from the discipline of practical theology, the emerging themes were reflected on theologically: this reflection will be discussed in chapter 6.

[41] One participant asked for a minor change in the wording of a piece of advice he had recalled in the interview.

CHAPTER 4: THE PARTICIPANTS

4.1 Summary

Fourteen mainly older leaders, twelve men and two women,[42] agreed to participate in the interviews. Ten of the leaders live in Northern Ireland, two in the United States, one in England and one in the Irish Republic. Their average age was sixty-one. All but three had experience in leading a local congregation. For some, the leadership journey had included both local church leadership and leadership in a wider denominational capacity. Two of those who had previously been in church leadership are currently leading in mission-focussed organisations. All of the participants self-identify as evangelical,[43] and represent several denominations, including Baptist, Presbyterian and Anglican.

4.2 Composition of the sample

The selection merits several contextual comments.

4.2.1 The diversity of evangelicalism

First, it should be noted that evangelicalism is a diverse family (Wells, 1994, p.389). Various attempts have been made to define its core elements, including, perhaps most influentially, Bebbington's quadrilateral, consisting of the significance accorded to conversion, to the importance of activism, not least on the part of laypeople, the importance of the Bible, and 'the focus of the gospel', the centrality of the cross (1989, p.14).

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[42] Two other women were invited, but were unable to participate in the research. While it would have been desirable to include a higher proportion of women, the reality is that in the Northern Irish evangelical world, from which most of the participants were drawn, men significantly outnumber women in leadership positions. For example, women are estimated to make up five percent of the 400 ministers of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, Northern Ireland's largest Protestant denomination. Note Toal and Hewitt's observation that, compared with the wider church worldwide, 'it may appear that there is a relatively more conservative attitude among Protestant Christians in Ireland towards the role of women' (1998, p.292).

[43] Demonstrated in their willingness to subscribe to the Basis of Faith of the Evangelical Alliance (UK): see Appendix 6.

Part of the strength of Bebbington's system is its ability to allow for diversity among evangelicals who share a commitment to the four elements but who may place varying degrees of emphasis on each of them or may differ in terms of their precise interpretation (McGrath, 1993, p.81).

While widely referred to, and acknowledged as having been able to 'boil evangelicalism down to its theological essence' (Dochuk, 2015, p.63), Bebbington's proposal has not been beyond suggestions for adjustment or improvement. For example, he opted not to include a specific reference to the Holy Spirit or to fellowship, two elements highlighted by McGrath (1993, p.51).[44] [45] Nonetheless, Warner argued that neither the emphasis on the Spirit nor fellowship could be 'credibly claimed as historically persistent evangelical priorities' (2007, p.18). Bebbington himself argues that 'it cannot be conceded that the ministry of the Spirit was consistently on a par with the other prominent features of evangelicalism' (2015, p.89). In Bebbington's view the addition of other elements could have led to the exclusion of some groups (1994, p.367).

Larsen's (2007) definition included all four of Bebbington's elements (albeit in a different form), but he argued that it was important to add an historical reference point to the definition as well as including (as Packer and McGrath had done) a specific reference to the work of the Holy Spirit, while Dochuk (2015) wondered whether there might be a place for eschatology, and Stott proposed adjusting the elements of Packer's and Bebbington's definitions to be more deliberately Trinitarian, suggesting that conversion, evangelism and fellowship are an elaboration of, rather than an addition to the emphases on Scripture (mediating the authority of God), the majesty of Christ, and the lordship of the Spirit (1999, p.28).[46]

Warner (2007) proposed that three additional features should be noted: Christocentrism (perhaps assumed in Bebbington's crucicentrism), a transformed life, and the aspiration for revival. He developed his analysis of more recent English evangelical history by

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[44] McGrath borrowed from Packer's earlier (1978) work on evangelical Anglican identity.

[45] See also Kidd (2015, p.54).

[46] Stott also set out ten ways in which he believed that evangelicalism differed from fundamentalism (1999, pp.21-24).

using two contrasting axes,[47] each derived from elements of Bebbington's quadrilateral. He sees three orientations along the evangelical spectrum: the progressives and the exclusivists, whom he situates at different poles on the biblicist/crucicentrist axis, with the cautiously open conservatives, on the conversionist/activist axis. It is these middle ground, moderate conservatives, in Warner's view, who hold the key to the future evolution of English evangelicalism (2007, p.241).

4.2.2 Evangelicalism and Northern Ireland

Second, what of Northern Ireland and its evangelicals? Jordan has suggested that 'Evangelical Protestantism is one of the least understood and least engaged sectors of Northern Ireland's society…' (2001, p.xi). Whether or not sociologists of religion are right to consider it a 'problematic and exceptional case' (Mitchell, 2004), Northern Ireland is regarded as the most religious region in the United Kingdom (Brewer, 2004).

To a casual observer, the conflict of recent years is confirmation of this: not that the 'religious conflict' thesis is confined to casual observers. While acknowledging the social and economic factors in the conflict, Bruce argued that it was the force of competing religious traditions that gave the conflict 'its enduring and intractable quality' (1989, p.249). Specifically, he highlighted the significance of evangelicalism as a key element of Protestant and loyalist identity (1989, p.264; 1994, pp.25,29).

Even if much of it is conservative (Brewer, 2004), the diversity of Northern Irish evangelicalism may have been masked to some extent by the tendency to associate it with the traditional evangelicalism of the late religious and political leader, Ian Paisley (Ganiel, 2008, p.69). Ganiel noted the existence of a 'mediating' kind of evangelicalism, in contrast to the traditional 'Covenantal Calvinist' style of the traditionalists. Her research also highlighted the existence of two further groups, pietists and post-evangelicals.[48]

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[47] Biblicist/crucicentrist and conversionist/activist.

[48] She preferred to distinguish between two types of evangelical rather than between evangelicals and fundamentalists (2008, p.4).

Mitchell and Ganiel have argued for an appreciation of the diversity among Northern Irish evangelicals, suggesting (2011, p.4) that 'academic research has long established that evangelicals in Northern Ireland are a diverse group, and their subculture is home to people who believe and practice their faith in quite different ways ….' [49] They also suggest that 'Northern Irish evangelicals have much in common with evangelicals across the world' (2011, p.3).

With regard to the research, of the Northern Irish leaders whose leadership had essentially been exercised within denominational settings, five were Presbyterian, two Baptist, two Anglican, and one independent charismatic. The other Northern Irish leaders lead in non-denominational settings.

The Presbyterian Church in Ireland[50] is the largest Protestant denomination in Northern Ireland and is basically an evangelical denomination although Erskine noted the tensions between liberal and fundamentalist tendencies within the church (1998, p.64).

The Church of Ireland is a protestant, episcopal church which stands 'theologically, pastorally and geographically … between the ethos and outlook of Roman Catholicism on the one hand and Presbyterianism on the other' (Gibson Harries & Turner, 1998, p.67).

The Association of Baptist Churches in Ireland which is separate from the Baptist Union of Great Britain, may be the most uniformly conservative of the three denominations: as McMillan (1998, p.106) noted, their (1993) Basis of Doctrine is conservatively evangelical.[51]

Most of Northern Ireland's new charismatic churches have their roots in the renewal movement of the 1990s, with many of their founding members emerging from

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[49] See also Thomson's observation that 'while evangelicalism in Northern Ireland may not reflect the same degree of diversity found elsewhere, there is a lot more to evangelicalism in this community than many people think' (1998, p.249).

[50] Note that denominations tend to organise on an all-island basis, doubtless since their formation predates the partition of 1921.

[51] The Doctrinal Basis was most recently updated in May 2016 and remains conservatively evangelical (ABCI, 2017). The short section on humanity refers to men and women as 'equal in value and complementary in role'.

protestant evangelical denominations (Roy and Reid, 1998): however the fact that the charismatic renewal movement also affected Roman Catholics appears to have resulted in a greater ecumenicity among these churches than among other evangelicals.

The majority of the Northern Irish participants in the research could be classified, in Ganiel's term, as mediating, rather than traditional, evangelicals. This was evident, for example, in some of the views expressed about women in leadership, about the Holy Spirit, or in attitudes to non-evangelicals.

4.2.3 Denominational influences

Some of the crucibles discussed, such as conversion (see section 5:2), may be more likely among evangelical leaders than among others. It is also worth asking if there is evidence that some forms of crucible are more likely to occur in the context of denomination-specific patterns of ministry.

Some of the themes that will be discussed in the thesis clearly transcended denominational backgrounds: for example, both Presbyterians and Anglicans discussed experiences of conversion. Nor was the experience of calling restricted to one denomination: both Brian (Baptist) and Graham (Anglican) discussed the importance of Scripture in establishing their sense of call. The crucible of conflict was certainly not the preserve of one denomination, though it is worth noting the power of church elders in Simon's (Presbyterian) experience:[52] are there certain leadership structures that are more or less likely to give rise to leadership conflict?

Hendron's (2013) work on clergy and secondary trauma raises significant questions with regard to Anglican structures. She discovered that some clergy were reticent to discuss trauma experiences with their bishop: there was a perception that to open up to such a senior leader may be viewed as a sign of weakness. This problem appeared to be compounded among women clergy. Not that there was no support: for example some clergy were more likely to speak to their rural dean, or curates to their rector. While Hendron's research focussed on the Church of Ireland, none of this should suggest that

[52] And that this was in an American context, although breakdowns between elders or other lay leaders and the pastor/minister are not unknown elsewhere!

other denominations necessarily fare better in terms of the support provided by senior leaders. Furthermore, Robbins' and Francis' work with Anglican clergywomen in England and the correlation between being responsible for multiple churches and loss of satisfaction (Robbins & Francis, 2014) should also be noted.

The mention of the particular case of female clergy touches on a particular crucible that will be further mentioned in chapter 5 in relation to Shirley's work in a denomination that had agreed in principle to accepting women in leadership but where traces of a more patriarchal view remained, an example of what Adams refers to as 'loose-coupling', where there is a perceived difference between official policy and unofficial practice (Adams, 2007, p.82).

4.2.4 Non-Northern Irish participants

A fourth area for comment relates to the non-Northern Irish participants. The single English participant had been working in a senior leadership role with a significant evangelical mission organisation (he has not served in a denominational setting) whose recruits are examined on doctrinal orthodoxy and depth of understanding.

Both North Americans have been associated, at various stages in their leadership journeys, with the conservative Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), a Calvinistic denomination whose historical origins lie in its response to perceived liberalism.[53] In addition, one of the American leaders is now part of the Acts 29 Network, a growing, increasingly worldwide church-planting movement that is built on a foundation of Calvinist, conservative doctrine.[54]

Overall, to use Warner's terms, most of the participants in the research would be best classified as moderate conservatives; some would probably straddle the

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[53] 'It separated from the Presbyterian Church in the United States (Southern) in opposition to the long-developing theological liberalism which denied the deity of Jesus Christ and the inerrancy and authority of Scripture. Additionally, the PCA held to the traditional position on the role of women in church offices' (PCA, n.d.) The page goes on to outline the PCA's commitment to Calvinist doctrine.

[54] 'Acts 29 stands in the tradition of historic evangelical confessionalism' (Acts 29, n.d.). Among their 'five theologically driven core values' are 'the sovereignty of God in saving sinners', 'the equality of male and female' and the principle of male servant leadership.

moderate/exclusive classifications, with the two Americans closest to the exclusivist conservative tendency.

4.2.5 Age profiles

One final comment relates to the age profile of the leaders. If Clinton's claim that 'God develops a leader over a lifetime' (1988, p.25) is correct, then we may expect that the longer a leader lives, the more lessons he or she will be able to draw on (assuming they are sensitive to the need to learn from experience). The fact that these participants had an average age of 61 meant they were able to draw on several decades of leadership experience, something that enriched the research findings.

Chapter 2 has already noted Clinton's timeline as a way of understanding the shaping of a leader. While his work is open to the charge of being 'overly systematized' (Banks & Ledbetter, 2006, p.loc.1781), it nonetheless highlights the idea that leaders may expect to experience different aspects of development at different points during the course of their leadership.

Whitehead and Whitehead explored 'Christian life patterns',[55] including what they described as 'the invitations of the mid-years' (1995a, p.p.111). They suggested that the middle years (thirties to sixties) are characterised by three themes: 'personal power, care, and interiority' (p.114). It is not difficult to see how the first two of these themes, which refer to the desire to be effective and the desire or need to be responsible for others, both aspects of the move towards Erikson's 'generativity', form part of a leader's development.[56]

Is it therefore possible to identify different types of crucible experience that might occur at different stages of a leader's development? Some of the crucibles that will be discussed, such as the crucible of conversion or call, are likely to occur early for many leaders. Critical challenges, whether in leadership or personal (not least the family crises referred to by several leaders) can be expected throughout a leadership journey, while

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[55] Note also the reference to Hagberg and Guelich in chapter 2.

[56] 'Generativity points to a willingness to use my power responsibly in the service of interests that go beyond myself' (Whitehead & Whitehead, 1995, p.121).

issues like retirement (which proved to be one of the surprising findings of the research) inevitably occur late in a leader's journey.

In *Crucibles of Leadership*, a follow up to *Geeks and Geezers*, Robert Thomas (2008) suggested that there are three broad types of crucible experience: 'new territory', 'reversals', and 'suspension', and that each of these tends to be associated with a different stage of a leader's career. The presentation of the results of this research in chapter 5 will follow a slightly amended version of Thomas' typology.

4.3 The Participants

4.3.1. Brian

Brian is approaching retirement after twenty years as a Baptist pastor.

Early leadership experience came during a teaching career and a significant turning point in his life as a Christian came about as the result of the influence of an important mentor during time spent in New Zealand. Entering church leadership proved to be a steep learning curve and the early years of his leadership quickly provided him with a crucible experience that will be described in chapter 5.

Three themes, probably interconnected, appear to characterise Brian's life and leadership journey: trust, the sovereignty of God, and a sense of calling. They have contributed to his ability to do what he has been able to do. He noted, 'They have allowed me to remain faithful, to stay put, to make decisions I wouldn't otherwise make. You know, God has been faithful to me.'

4.3.2 Stuart

Stuart has retired from church ministry, although he spent the first four years of retirement working as a pastoral associate. Early indicators of leadership aptitude came in the arena of local politics (which he opted to leave on his conversion to Christianity) and a family business.

The longest of Stuart's three pastorates was in the church from which he retired. Chapter 5 will describe a crucible experience that was set against the background of Northern Ireland's complex political situation. While it was painful, it helped Stuart to crystallise his beliefs as a church leader.

Retirement has brought its challenges for Stuart, including needing to leave the church he had led for over twenty years, but also allowed an opportunity to review how God has been at work through his ministry.

4.3.3 Larry

Larry, in his 60s, has led a Belfast church for almost thirty years, following a short ministry in a rural setting. A difficult childhood has led to a journey of needing to deal with a tendency to self-reliance.

Larry admitted to a lack of enthusiasm for the institution of his denomination: this led to him resisting an early sense of call to church ministry.

His leadership has overseen several significant paradigm shifts in the church, notably in relation to spiritual gifts and the role of women. These paradigm shifts (and others) will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter 5.

4.3.4 Shirley

Shirley was the first of two females in the project. At the time of the interview she was in her late fifties and in the process of establishing a new ministry dedicated to spiritual formation. The impetus for this has come from her own experience as a leader and an awareness of the need to find appropriate rhythms of life.

Her career path has been varied and she has had to navigate some painful crucible experiences, including singleness, illness and the difficulty of leading as a woman in a male-dominated organisation.

4.3.5 Steve

Steve (60) is one of two Americans in the research. For the past five years he has led a small American congregation; previously he has pastored other churches as well as working overseas (a form of crucible) - in Europe - for six years.

Some of the greatest life challenges have come in his subsequent return to North America and have taken the form of painful personal circumstances in which he has needed to sense the reality of God's love.

4.3.6 Graham

Graham is in his mid-sixties and works as a Mission Director. He has been in vocational Christian ministry for four decades, including time in local church leadership, mission and senior denominational leadership.

He described his conversion as 'the most significant turning point' and, despite his being something of a reluctant leader, the path to ordained ministry seems to have been very clear.

He reflected on several significant shaping experiences, some of which have been deeply emotional and he believes have been part of 'God's preparation'.

A significant theme in Graham's life has been his clear sense that the journey of leadership is also a journey of discipleship.

4.3.7 Vic

Vic had recently retired after three decades of church leadership in the Republic of Ireland. He grew up in the North and the circumstances of 'The Troubles' provided a major part of the backdrop to his leadership journey.

The early phases of his ministry in the Republic were a struggle, with culture shock and a sense of unpreparedness. However, he eventually became at home in this new situation where the particular circumstances of being a Reformed minister working in an essentially Roman Catholic setting formed a crucible out of which a unique, if somewhat controversial, ministry emerged.

The experience of serious illness in more recent years became one of the factors leading to retirement and limiting some of his plans. Retirement, while being like the removal of scaffolding, has also intensified a new spiritual emphasis. With the help of a mentor, Vic has been learning 'to be' with God, and not always to be doing something.

4.3.8 Frank

Frank is in the second half of his fifties. At the time of the interview he was at a career transition point, preparing to begin work in a strategic mission agency, having served at various levels (including Executive Director) for another organisation.

He was one of several participants in the research who recalled the early loss of his father: he believes that such losses have helped shape the person he has become, developing a degree of resilience. Nonetheless, the circumstances that helped cultivate resilience contributed to a degree of independence.

His leadership has involved dealing with some severe crises, including a West African coup d'état, followed a couple of weeks later by the loss of a senior colleague and his wife in a plane crash.

He believes that challenging experiences have given an extra dimension to what he already believed to be true: theological beliefs that he has held have been grasped on a deeper level.

4.3.9 Ruth

Ruth (61), the second woman in the research, shares with her husband the title 'pastor emeritus' at the church they have established.

Early opportunities were limited due to her original church's conservative understanding of the ministry of women. Ruth's own changed opinion on this issue is one of several paradigm shifts that she has encountered. Others included her understanding and experience of the Holy Spirit.

Some of the most difficult aspects of leadership have involved relational breakdown: the biggest challenges have tended to come in relation to family issues. She has learned about persevering and finding strength in God: 'Probably one of the greatest things that you need to learn on leadership is the ability to strengthen yourself in God.'

4.3.10 Simon

Simon, in his mid 60s, leads a church in America. Growing up as a son of the manse, his earliest opportunity to observe Christian leadership came through watching his father: 'My dad was a pastor and was the finest man I've ever known.'

His leadership path has included five churches, two of which were the setting for painful crucibles of rejection that plunged Simon into a spiritual crisis. He began to emerge from this crucible, experiencing the kindness of friends who gathered around him and

the reassurance of God's love. A new church emerged and has been established and become part of a wider church-planting network.

Simon's crucible experience has shaped the 'existential intensity' of his convictions and he believes that he would not be the leader he is today had it not been for the difficult experiences.

4.3.11 Noel

Noel (41) was the youngest leader in the study. He is part of the leadership team of a parachurch organisation involved in evangelism.

Like others in this study, Noel's leadership has taken place against the backdrop of the politico-religious situation in Ireland. His background was strongly Protestant but his attitude has changed, in part as he has gained a wider perspective on recent Irish history: 'you get to see another side to it'.

He believes that the most difficult part of his leadership journey has been to maintain focus: this has meant declining other job offers and the temptation to compromise his convictions or get involved in politics.

4.3.12 Geoff

Geoff, in his early 60s, had retired prematurely from church leadership for health reasons. He recalled having been able early on to see that he 'was a leader not a follower'.

Over the course of four decades, Geoff led five churches. Each of the churches brought its own particular challenge and leadership themes emerged, including his willingness to confront issues.

While Geoff's time in each of his churches appears to have been marked by significant congregational growth, his fifth church, from which he retired, proved to be 'the hardest church and the hardest experience', stretching his leadership and 'everything in me'.

Hence, premature retirement, although not unwelcome, has left Geoff with a degree of disappointment in that he felt he had been unable to make much impact on the church. Despite numerical growth, he feels that the gospel had made limited impact on church members' lives.

Geoff is aware of several ways in which he has changed over his four decades of leadership, including a greater openness to the gifts of the Spirit, and a wider vision of what the Church is.

4.3.13 Ian

Ian is in his mid-sixties and is a senior leader in his denomination.

His 'very dramatic conversion' at a Boy's Brigade camp brought with it the seeds of a call to vocational ministry and his leadership abilities became apparent during his university years

He has worked in a series of leadership positions in a variety of situations. None of the roles was the same as the others and he enjoyed the transitions – most of which have been accompanied by a strong sense of call - finding that he was able to leave the previous thing and move on.

A recurring theme in Ian's leadership has been what he refers to as the 'Popeye Factor', an overwhelming sense that something must be done to change a particular situation. Recalling the relational and spiritual poverty of the church where he grew up, he believes that has been a defining factor in his leadership. Such poverty of experience needs to be changed:

> My passion, right, is that the local church should be a revelation of what it's like in the Kingdom of Heaven. That heaven is revealed here on earth. That when people worship in the local church they see a dimension that they don't see anywhere else, right? Because if they don't, why would they bother? So that the church is there to reveal the values of the Kingdom of God to the world around it.

4.3.14 Tim

Tim, who was almost fifty at the time of his interview, is one of the younger participants interviewed. He was transitioning to a global role with a Christian organisation.

Tim described himself as a reluctant leader for the first forty years of his life. A significant turning point came at a conference when one of the speakers addressed reluctant leaders in the audience: Tim was forced to acknowledge that he was a leader.

While still in his twenties, Tim experienced the sudden loss of his girlfriend. He was personally and emotionally devastated but held on to his belief in God. It was as though he disassembled his faith and put it back together. He needed to know that it worked and having decided that it did, he was able to build on it.

Two vocational passions have marked his leadership: first for the Church and then a desire to help people get to grips with the contemporaneity of the Bible. He pastored for over five years, since which time his leadership journey has taken him into wider spheres of influence, as he now transitions into a global role. He has made these transitions with a strong sense of call and a clear awareness of what his ministry priorities should be.

CHAPTER 5: RESULTS OF THE INTERVIEWS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will describe the kinds of crucibles that were experienced by the participants. It should be noted that the wide-ranging nature of the interviews resulted in data that went beyond the strict limitations of the research question.

5.1.1 MAXQDA™

A detailed coding exercise was carried out using MAXQDA™ software. This exercise highlighted themes relating to a more comprehensive picture of leader development. In total, 208 codes were identified, although some of these occurred in only a small number of interviews.

Given that the interviews had set out to establish a wide context for the research question, and that the participants were following the lead of the researcher in semi-structured interviews, some of the frequently occurring codes were hardly unexpected. Nonetheless they help to provide a rich picture of the contours of a leadership journey. In addition, many of the themes will be referred to and discussed in the results and discussion chapters that follow.

Table 5.1 shows the most significant codes (arranged alphabetically), each of which occurred in five or more interviews.

Table 5.1 MAXQDA™ data

	Code	Number of interviews
1	Becoming a Christian	9
2	Bible	12
3	Calling	14 (all)
4	Challenge	12
5	Change	10
6	Character of God	7
7	Character/personality	9

8	Charismatic	9
9	Christian growth	8
10	Conflict	5
11	Crisis	6
12	Crucible/crucibles	14
13	Denominations	10
14	Disappointment	6
15	Failure	6
16	Family/marriage	14 (all)
17	Father	12
18	Frustration	6
19	God speaking	13
20	Guidance	6
21	Hardship experiences	6
22	Holy Spirit	9
23	Illness	8
24	Inner conviction	9
25	Ireland	6
26	Leadership style	11
27	Learning about leadership	13
28	Loss	8
29	Ministry success	8
30	New opportunities	8
31	Opposition	7
32	Paradigm shifts	7
33	Passion	5
34	Prayer	12
35	Reading	6
36	Reflection	5

37	Relationships	8
38	Reluctant leader	6
39	Resilience	5
40	Responsibility	6
41	Sensing	5
42	Sovereignty of God	10
43	Spiritual conflict	5
44	The Lord's leading	5
45	Theology	5
46	Training and study	8
47	Transformation	6
48	Transition	10
49	Travel/living overseas	8

5.1.2 Crucible experiences

The rest of the chapter will describe the various kinds of crucible experiences that were discussed by the leaders: ways in which crucible experiences contributed to the development of the leaders will be discussed more fully in chapter 6.

As chapter 2 noted, Thomas developed the crucible concept by identifying three major types of crucible that he classified as 'new territory', 'reversal', and 'suspension' (Thomas, 2008, p.20). In reporting the findings of the interviews this chapter will use Thomas' three types.

This third type of crucible overlaps somewhat with the *isolation* concept[57] discussed by both Clinton (1988) and Trebesch (1997). Isolation experiences need not be restricted to the end of a leader's career but may occur at any point during a leadership journey. In the context of this research the term *isolation* may be more useful than *suspension*, with its disciplinary overtones, and will be used here.

[57] See the discussion in chapter 2.

5.2 New territory

The first set of experiences falls into Robert Thomas' 'new territory' category, where leaders face new situations that they are able to integrate into their own experience. As McKenna et al observed, 'pastors learn many of the key lessons of leadership when they are at the edge of their comfort zones' (2007b, p.196). This section will discuss four types of experience that could be categorised as 'new territory'.

5.2.1 Conversion

Given the prominence accorded to *conversionism* in Bebbington's (1989) treatment of British evangelicalism,[58] it is unsurprising that this theme should occur. Some leaders described their conversion experience in quite dramatic terms. Insofar as conversion involved a change in life direction, it may be considered a crucible of new territory. In some cases the conversion experience appeared to carry the seeds of a call to leadership.

5.2.1.1 Day/night experience

> I woke up the next morning … from a really deep sleep of rest that I hadn't experienced … in any day that I can remember. And I was a different person … that was the beginning of … a journey that … continues (Steve).

> Beyond a shadow of doubt, becoming a Christian at the age of 12 was utterly, completely and totally life-changing for me, because I started walking a new road … It was from that night on when … I just really surrendered my life to God and owned Jesus as Lord that I had a different set of priorities, I'd different aspirations, I'd different values, and for me … it was a genuine, sincere, whole-hearted commitment to Christ that was made. And … I can honestly say I have not been the same since (Graham).

> When you become a Christian … start to read the Scriptures and fellowship with others and figure it out, you've an entirely [sic] change of focus … From living a life that was me-centred, now it was a life of Jesus-centred so you sought to do things that pleased Jesus and not please me (Noel).

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[58] In the Northern Irish context, Mitchell and Ganiel note that 'the belief in the *necessity* of conversion, as well as having the *experience* of conversion is crucial to Northern Irish evangelicalism' (2011, 31).

These extracts describe classic expressions of evangelical conversion[59] by which the convert is transformed and their life is no longer the same. As such, conversion is a form of crucible in which fundamental questions of identity and purpose are answered. It is significant that both Graham and Noel described a change in their priorities as a result of their conversion.

5.2.1.2 Stages of conversion

For some leaders, the transformation was less immediate and their Christian commitment appeared to take root only as a result of a subsequent experience.

Brian referred to a 'pivotal point' in his Christian experience when his Christian life 'took off' during a professional exchange in New Zealand. Following an earlier conversion experience, he had made little progress in his faith. In New Zealand he met a significant mentor who became instrumental in establishing the circumstances of what turned out to be a significant crucible experience.

> Russell Burt sensed there was something about me and he asked me to be a part of the Scripture Union ski camp … I said I would and at that camp he had wanted me to give my testimony. Now to this very day in this work, I know the reality of spiritual warfare. I began to feel so insecure, I felt, you know, I'm just a liar; I'm not saved. You know this man's asking me to speak to these young people. I'm not really saved. And then I began to imagine that day in the ski field in the morning, everybody was avoiding me – I thought. And I thought, you know, they see through you, Brian. You are a liar of the first order. And I remember going down to the bunk room and on my knees crying out to God. I was aware that I was in a battle, that if I gave my testimony it was going to be important – I didn't know how important; but I went down – now Russell actually, he had the rest of them praying for me; he knew there was something not right. But I went down and the Lord gave me courage. And I'm telling you, I was for opting out, and he gave me the opt out clause as well, Russell, when he knew … I got up, I gave my testimony. Lives were saved. The camp was changed and my Christian life took off. That was the day that my Christian life took off and the church became important to me. And that year I grew and I grew.

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[59] Bebbington (1989, pp.7-8) notes the differing views among British evangelicals with regard to whether conversions were gradual or were 'the change of a particular moment'.

In a similar way, it was a second experience that established Stuart's faith. He had experienced an initial conversion when he was fifteen, responding to the appeal in a Billy Graham-style mission.

> And the appeal was made and I came. I made my decision. And I was counselled for about 2 minutes. And I was left, I was now on the right side of the track – 'over the line' – and I was handed over to whoever would be the influencer. I was brought to meetings for a year or two until they got tired and I was sort of left floundering.

After a few years of 'drifting', he experienced what he considers his 'real conversion'. He had gone to church, somewhat reluctantly, to help his family swell the numbers for a visiting preacher. Although he has no recollection of the content of the sermon, the next two days were spent under 'huge conviction of sin'[60] before he met an old school friend.

> I remember talking to Ian and coming back to Christ at about two in the morning. And just, that was, as far as I was concerned, that was, the whole repentance bit came in there, you know and the whole grasping of Christ came in there, you know.

As with the earlier examples of changed priorities, Stuart's conversion proved to be a major decision, leading him to leave the world of politics in which he had become involved.

> One of the first things I did was to come out of politics because I couldn't reconcile what was going on there with my new-found faith, because I believe that it was at this stage that things really clicked as far as becoming a Christian was concerned.

Eventually the change would lead him to leave the family-run business to pursue theological training.

> But then as time went on this whole religious bit came back into my life, you know, and priorities, and this is not what I want to spend, I don't want to spend my life making money.

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[60] Bebbington (1989) observes how some evangelicals expected conversion to be preceded by an extended period of 'awakening' (1989, p.8).

5.2.1.3 Conversion and call

Given how a conversion experience can lead to such a degree of reorientation, it is hardly surprising that the experience of conversion might contain within it the seeds of calling. Ian's recollection of conversion illustrates this:

> If I were to really be honest, I never was aware of any dramatic call to ordination; but I had a very dramatic conversion. So my conversion and my call are very closely interlinked.

The occasion was a youth camp where Ian was struck by the very personal nature of God's love for him, 'the value God placed on me', and responded to the speaker's invitation to give his life to Christ.

> It was a call to give my life to God … I think maybe there was more of a call to ministry involved in that than I actually was aware of at the time.

While not every conversion explicitly involved a call to ministry, there were examples of a significant change in priorities for several of the participants that would eventually lead them into vocational leadership.

5.2.2 Leadership as new territory

In itself, an initial experience of leadership is likely to be a form of new territory. For some leaders, it is a 'baptism of fire' or a 'steep learning curve'. One leader described how her first experience of vocational Christian leadership had not been 'the bucket of roses that maybe I'd hoped it would be'.

There are several aspects to this theme:

5.2.2.1 Reluctant leaders

While some leaders have always been comfortable with the idea of leadership and appear to have taken to it naturally and with ease, for others it was more a case of leadership looking for them rather than their looking for leadership.

> For many years I would regard myself as a reluctant leader. I don't like pushing myself forward … I wouldn't naturally or instinctively choose to be upfront. But when I look at my life from school days … I recognise that I was often coughed up into leadership positions. What I came to see in later life was that actually others saw in me things that

> I certainly did not see in myself. And I guess I came to a point in my life where I had to acknowledge and recognise that God had given me leadership gifts and I needed to suck it up (Graham).

Brian had also been a reluctant leader, put off by the responsibility involved.

> You had to be thinking a lot about other people and the outcomes of your decisions, you know … I've no problem making decisions for myself, and if I messed up that's ok; I can make decisions, but when I make them in relation to others, I always found that something I wrestled with. So I discovered that somehow I ended up in positions of leadership even though I didn't want to be, from quite an early age.

We returned to the theme of responsibility later in the interview and it was clear that Brian has come to terms with it and now views it differently.

> My responsibility now doesn't weigh me down; it doesn't worry me. I get on with what I'm doing … I feel very content in what I'm doing. I feel the rightness of my life and where I'm living.

Three themes that appeared to feature strongly in Brian's story were trust, God's sovereignty,[61] and calling. Brian agreed that these had helped him to be able to lead.

> Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. They have allowed me to remain faithful, to stay put, to make decisions I wouldn't otherwise make. You know God has been real to me.

Tim's story adds a further nuance to the idea of reluctant leaders in that it was not leadership *per se* that put him off, but rather the idea of being considered as a leader. There were two reasons for this.

People he had known grew in their own sense of importance to the point where they would no longer acknowledge him in some settings, while other leaders behaved inappropriately: 'and it was devastating for me to think that this could happen.'

The ability to embrace the idea of being a leader came about as the result of a 'watershed moment' while he attended the Willow Creek Global Leadership Summit.[62]

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[61] In all, ten of the interviews mentioned the theme of God's sovereignty.

One of the speakers, author Marcus Buckingham, prefaced his talk by addressing reluctant leaders.

> He said, 'There are some of you sitting here and you're leaders, but he said the best way to describe you is reluctant leaders.' He said, 'And for one reason or another you still are resisting the definition of leader being applied to you.' And I thought, 'Oh this should be interesting.' And he said, 'Let me deal with a couple of things.' He said, 'Number one: if you can't help but gravitate towards the helm of everything you're involved in, even when you're relaxing or having fun,' he said, 'sooner or later you're going to have to wake up to the fact that you're a leader.' And … I'm thinking of all those things I've been involved in since I've been a teenager where – I actually don't participate well in things … just naturally gravitate towards taking hold of things … it's just the way it is. He said, 'Now,' he said, 'for some of you that's still not enough. You've got a different problem.' He said, 'Your problem is you won't own the word leader because you're afraid that it will take you on an ego trip.' And he said, 'And maybe … you've been let down by other leaders and you've seen this happen ….' And I'm going, 'Somebody's been telling this guy my story ….' And he said, 'Let me put it to you like this,' he said, 'no leader ever fell because their ego was too big: they fell because their ethics weren't big enough … the higher you go up the leadership ladder, the higher your ethical standards have to go to accompany you on that journey and if this overtakes … if the leadership position overtakes the standard of your ethics, that's when you're going to come a cropper.'

That proved to be a 'shot between the eyes'. He phoned his wife to tell her: 'I think I have finally grasped the reason I was born.'

He recalled:

> For me the change was that I actually owned this … I think the change there was I had gone to the point where I was now happy to self-identify in leadership as opposed to just letting other people identify it for me.

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[62] An annual conference designed for leaders and facilitated by Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois.

Not only has the initial challenge of embracing a leadership calling represented a crucible experience for some leaders: once in leadership, further challenges had to be faced.

5.2.2.2 Navigating the learning curve

> I got the post and it was a steep learning curve. Suddenly to find yourself heading up a church and realising you hadn't a baldy notion really. Nobody had ever taught me to take a funeral or a wedding. You know, suddenly I was confronted with 13 funerals [first 18 months to 2 years]. You talk about sleepless nights again. And I'd never taken weddings. I had a basic [?] you know step out in faith, ask a few people the important questions, read a bit and basically work it all out (Brian).

Stuart, one of the older participants in the research referred to 'muddling through experience, striking the anvil', though at a key turning point in his leadership journey he was also able to draw on the significant influence of two well established leaders who both became 'absolutely crucial as far as my development of leadership style was concerned'.

Along with her husband, Ruth was involved in establishing a new church. It began as a house church. Looking back on leaving their previous church, she said that they were 'terrified, but … so excited. We were on the adventure'.

> I think our journey in terms of leadership and learning even how to lead people and pastor people, it was very … we only learnt by doing; we weren't reading books; we were just kind of stumbling along learning as we go.

She recalled some of the intense pastoral situations they found themselves dealing with as a 'baptism of fire', admitting that, lacking in know-how, they handled them 'very naively'.

Another term that was used was Noel's description of being put in at 'the deep end', eight weeks after coming to faith, when the leaders of a church asked him to take responsibility for a youth service. It involved gathering friends to help out and being responsible to give a talk, something that was very much beyond Noel's comfort zone:

> Public speaking, leadership, would have absolutely [run] a mile from it and was totally incompetent at it.

He recalled an early, post-conversion experience of public speaking.

> There's no question I was nervous that night. It wasn't like I got up … God didn't take away my nerves in those early times, but I just started to get this: when I was sharing my story, when I was sharing the Scripture and stuff, my eyes were on God and my confidence was in him, whereas before my confidence was in myself.

Although he was not (at this stage) seen as a leader, he was able to gather a core of friends to help him. A strong sense of 'I can't do this on my own' forced him into conscious dependence on God.

5.2.2.3 Leading in virgin territory

A third aspect of the new territory of leadership was described in Shirley's repeated references to leading in 'virgin territory'.

> [A] mark of what I see throughout all the employment roles that I have had, all of which have had leadership responsibilities, that I have been drawn into things that are virgin territory at every stage.

Perhaps inevitably, this has led to challenges.

> And I think the challenges came from the fact that it was virgin territory; I had no mentor who knew how to help me, and I had to, to stick my neck out and take a risk. And sometimes, mostly it worked, and sometimes it didn't.

This meant that she had to 'carve a lot of stuff out for myself', and 'having to intuitively go after stuff'.

A source of confidence in navigating these crucibles has come in the form of a Bible verse that has taken on special significance for Shirley: she has been aware of this 'in every situation that I have been drawn into'.

> The Lord will go before you, the God of Israel will be your rear-guard (Isaiah 52:12).
>
> It's … something that I feel is a truth that I'm able to stand firmly on, not cling to in desperation, but stand firmly on, knowing it will never let me go: something that I know gives me such security … I think I have learnt a lot by being in situations where I've had to do something, and then realising that God in his grace was actually overseeing what I did.

5.2.2.4 Challenges and the Popeye Factor

Bennis and Thomas noted that most of the leaders in their research had chosen their crucibles (2002, p.98). Similarly Paterson and Delight observed the tendency of leaders to seek out opportunities that might stretch and develop them (2014, p.55).

Thus, while some crucibles are forced upon a leader, others are chosen as the leader responds to challenge.

> I'm one of these people who's always liked a challenge. And going to [Dublin] was a real challenge because there was actually a real possibility that that church was going to close. They were actually having great difficulty in paying the person who had retired from [Dublin] (Graham).

Graham was later invited to consider a senior leadership role in his denomination and was once again drawn to the element of challenge in the role.

> The more I heard about it the more I realised this could probably be one of the biggest challenges in my life, that I'd ever faced.

Geoff also spoke of being drawn by the prospect of meeting a challenge; he had been a 'confrontational warrior' with an inherent eagerness to tackle problems. He referred to the image of riding a 'white charger' to confront issues.

> There's a white horse outside I'm ready to go and get on that horse and confront the issue. I don't want to sit in the house and … I don't want to absorb it.

Ian summed up part of what new territory leadership involves when he said, 'I discovered then that leadership requires you to step out, and put your neck on the line, even though … your wife has a sleepless night.'

He also used a striking image that allowed him to describe his problem-solving, visionary capacity. He recalled listening to a leadership talk from Bill Hybels[63] in which he talked about the 'Popeye Factor'.

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[63] Founding Pastor of Willow Creek Community Church in Illinois.

> Popeye is going along with Olive Oyl or whatever it is, and Bluto comes along and takes Olive Oyl from him and then they go through this kind of thing where Popeye looks on, wonder what he's going to do, and then he gets to the point where he says 'I can't stand it I can't stand it no more' and he downs the spinach and he deals with it. [Hybels] says most people are in leadership because at some point they have said 'I can't stand it I can't stand it no more'.

It is dissatisfaction at some element of the status quo that inspires leaders to accept the challenge of bringing change. Dissatisfaction at his own church upbringing had sowed seeds of the discontent that has kept Ian in the leadership that he pursues with a passion to see churches renewed.

Some leaders will be willing to seek out crucible experiences, accepting challenges and refusing to accept the dissatisfaction of the status quo.

5.2.3 Paradigm shifts

With an average age of 61, much of the participants' experience was set against a background of notable cultural and ecclesiastical shifts which meant that, at least for some of them, paradigm shifts[64] were a significant part of their journey. These paradigm shifts, which may be classified as crucibles of new territory, involved issues such as the changing role of women in church leadership, understanding and expectation of the work of the Holy Spirit, changing models of church and issues specific to the Irish context during some of the years of 'the Troubles'. Paradigm shifts take leaders out of previous comfort zones and call for courage in leading.

Larry has led his church through significant paradigm shifts. These were the development of every member ministry, a transition to using a modern hymnbook, a greater degree of orientation towards the community, and an openness to charismatic gifts.

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[64] Heifetz & Linsky (2002) have distinguished between 'techincal' and 'adaptive' challenges: the former confront leaders with familiar problems and lend themselves to proven solutions, while adaptive challenges call for new solutions. However they suggest that while the leader takes responsibility for techincal challenges, the work of dealing with adaptive challenges must be done by the group experiencing the problem. Obviously the discussion in this section is about paradigm shifts on the part of a leader, so the parallel is not perfect. For discusions of the idea in the context of church leadership, see Cormode (2002) and Kinnison (2014).

The change in hymnbook illustrates the kind of courageous leadership that paradigm shifts may require. On being warned that proceeding with the change might result in members leaving, Larry said:

> Brothers, if we lose half our membership, we'll still be bigger than the average Presbyterian church. So if this is right, we'll do it. And if I don't find an increase of members as a result of changing our worship style, you can ask me to resign. But let's do it, because it's right.

Several shifts will be discussed in this section.

5.2.3.1 Models of church and ministry

Stuart discussed how he was able to assimilate new approaches to ministry into a denominational model that favoured 'one man ministry', and had elevated the minister to a place of considerable importance.

> There was nothing at that early stage that gave me anything but the impression that I was important in that ministry and then as time developed my ministry definitely changed.

It began to change ('I couldn't do everything') with the help of two important influences, David Watson in York and Ray Stedman in California.

> And those two in different ways were absolutely crucial as far as my development of leadership style was concerned; in that one emphasised shared gifting and the other emphasised shared leadership. And not exclusively: they were both on the same tact but with maybe the different emphasis on the Spirit. David Watson of course introduced the whole concept of the gifts of the Spirit.
>
> Ray Stedman was right into the whole point of shared body – 'Body Life' was his clarion cry: you know he was rediscovering I think the whole NT emphasis on body life. So those were the two things. So from that I developed my own interpretation of shared ministry and shared leadership.

It was when one of Stedman's staff members pointedly challenged his heavily-loaded schedule that Stuart realised his way of leading and doing ministry was far from ideal, prompting him to adopt a new leadership model without which he believes he could not have managed his church.

Ruth believed that the call to do something new was inherent in her call to leadership. Her leadership journey has been marked by several paradigm shifts, including a shift in her understanding of church.

> Wrapped up in that call to leadership was a real sense that God was saying that he wanted us to do something new. The chapter was Deuteronomy 1: 'It's time to leave this mountain', and we just both felt, independently of each other, it was time to leave our little assembly and start something new which we had no idea what that was going to be or what that was going to look like.

Initially this meant starting a house church with eleven people: 'a time of learning about church being community and family'. Despite early ups and downs, the church survived and eventually joined with another group to form the beginnings of a significant and influential church in Belfast.

Geoff's story also illustrated changing models of church and ministry. Part of this related to what Geoff described as the old model of [Baptist] ministry ('the suit, and leadership that gives the impression you can do it all'). He observed that while preachers were happy to talk about objective truth, they were unwilling to admit their struggles.

The suicide of a highly regarded pastor had a big impact on him.

> I thought to myself, he was the Pope of Irish Baptists, he was next to God, he had an authority and a dogmatism. He had – my wife would have said that he had weaknesses and needed some accountability. But no one in those days ever queried demagogues or leaders like that. They never share weaknesses, they never reveal weaknesses, and we unfortunately, we actually produced them. We produced those leaders. That was our form of popery. I don't mean that in a negative way: we had our own popes and they were our leaders. You didn't touch them, you didn't query them.

During his second pastorate he was aware of some of his own insecurity and at the same time was undergoing a paradigm shift in relation to the Holy Spirit.

> I believe halfway through [that ministry I] came into what I would say, the fullness of the Holy Spirit, an understanding of the Holy Spirit empowerment, and began to open up myself and my vulnerabilities. That one Wednesday night at a Bible study, when there's over a hundred people there, I actually said, 'every man struggles with lust, pastors struggle with lust, [I struggle] with lust.'

It was a key leadership moment, not only in that an elderly church office bearer thanked him and said 'I thought I was the only man in here like that', but also because it marked a break with what he had been taught about pastors displaying their 'dirty laundry' from the pulpit. His openness began to open up others.

Another shift came in helping a church to transition to a form of team leadership, the cost of which was less personal engagement for him with church members ('I struggled because of my personality') and the criticism that he was no longer pastoring! The elders regarded this as 'taking the hit' in order to make life easier for eventual successors.

5.2.3.2 Holy Spirit

A further paradigm shift for some of the leaders related to their understanding of the Holy Spirit.

Ruth spoke at length about her discovery of 'new things about the Holy Spirit'. Both she and her husband were initially suspicious of the Charismatic Movement, not least because of theological concerns. After her husband had a dramatic experience at Spring Harvest,[65] Ruth struggled with the question for a year.

> [My husband] had an experience of being baptised, filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues … He came back and shared it with me; I was OK about it, for a short period of time, and then I had a year of real struggle in terms of we're not singing off the same hymn sheet any longer. And also I would say in terms of my understanding of Scripture and what I'd been taught, and my respect for my mum and dad whose walk with God I still really value so much and thinking that if there was truth in this they would have experienced something of this, otherwise, you know, because I could see and value the depth of their love for Jesus. So I couldn't see how these two things came together.

She also acknowledged a degree of fear of emotionalism.

A sense of God speaking to her as she read the Bible along with a shift that came with reading a missionary biography helped move her through stages of accepting and seeking a new experience.

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[65] An annual Christian event that runs over several weeks around Easter.

> For me it was much more gradual, it wasn't as dramatic as [my husband's], but it was a gradual understanding that the person of the Holy Spirit … and the gifts of the Holy Spirit were crucial in terms of serving God, and, the best way I can put it is I feel like I got new spectacles … I saw life in a certain way and when I really opened up to have an openness to the Holy Spirit filling me and then coming with new gifts, I just feel like I had a different worldview. And honestly it was about the greatness of God … I just felt as if my understanding of God was quite narrow and in this, my understanding was that I don't understand and he is so much greater and bigger and more wonderful than I can ever, ever imagine. And so I just felt as if I got new spectacles.

This would prove to be a very significant experience in her leadership journey as she began to discover new areas of ministry.

> As a woman, having come from a background where women didn't even speak publicly … I was thrilled at the amount of freedom that I suddenly had.

For Ian, university in Dublin proved to be a time for significant spiritual development in several ways and it was in this context that he had an encounter with charismatic renewal.

> My first memory of such a phenomenon was Mary, who's now my wife, coming up to me … and she said, I have been to this strange meeting … And she said it's like a Brethren meeting, she says, but they're all Catholics.
>
> And one of the big issues then was speaking in tongues. You know, was this a good thing or a bad thing? And I remember thinking, aye, that would be great, you know … And then one night … it was as though the Lord said to me, I want you to pray until you run out of words … I prayed and then I started praying in tongues. And it was, I think I went on praying for hours, it was such an enlivening and kind of sense of worship. And I then kind of would have just been open to that. Now I wouldn't have been highly involved in it.

It should be noted that not everyone who experienced a paradigm shift in terms of their theology of charismatic renewal experienced all the phenomena that were often associated with the movement. Larry commented that he had always wanted 'a more charismatic experience', but God had never given it to him.

5.2.3.3 Women in leadership

In recent decades, one of the major discussion points in the Church generally, including among those identifying as evangelicals, has been the role of women in the church. While a significant number of evangelical groups and denominations have embraced an egalitarian position, in which there are no gender-based distinctions in leadership roles, there are still significant numbers of evangelicals in Northern Ireland who limit some leadership roles to men; indeed groups such as the Association of Baptist Churches in Ireland (ABCI) are unlikely to adopt significant changes to their conservative policies in the near future.[66] While the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI) has had some three decades of women ministers, anecdotal evidence suggests that progress for women within the denomination is more difficult than for their male counterparts:[67] an example of Adams' 'loose-coupling' (Adams, 2007, p.82).[68]

Only two of the participants in the research were women. A later section will discuss their experience of the gender crucible, but the paradigm shift regarding women in leadership was not limited to them, although they were most likely to be personally affected by the issue.

While Ruth's leadership has developed in tandem with that of her husband, she is a leader in her own right and recalls early indicators of being drawn to leadership in school and university. Her conservative church background limited scope for leadership within church.

> I was never afraid of it. I always felt, yes, you know, there was something in me that wanted to do it – and some people would say that's not a good thing when it comes to Christian leadership, 'cos if you want it, it's probably not for you – but there was something in me that wanted to do it.

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[66] The recently updated ABCI Doctrinal Basis refers to men and women as 'equal in value and complementary in role' (ABCI, 2017).

[67] Not a matter limited to Irish Presbyterians: Ely et al. (2011) have reported on the underrepresentation of women in senior professional roles in North America.

[68] 'The mismatch between official organizational policy and actual organizational practices ….'

As she became more involved in the new church she and her husband had helped to start, there were opportunities to lead. This gave rise to questions.

> I found myself initiating things, pulling small teams together, getting things done, and I think in that context there then began to be a kind of … questioning where do women fit in in the whole leadership scene? How does this work?
>
> There was something beginning to stir in me: you know, what does a woman in leadership look like?

There was a struggle. She recalled a Vineyard women's conference where a (female) leader cautioned against seeking certain leadership roles.

> If as a woman, you're looking for a place of leadership in the sense of leading the church as an elder, that is not something that God has for us as women.[69]

Her journey on the question was also the journey of the church leadership. After a period of study and reflection the elders decided to change the official position of the church.

> As a church when we came to the decision this is the route we are going to go down. That was, I mean that was life-changing because that gave me the opportunity to actually do it, you know, and not just to sort of debate it, talk about it, but to actually do it.

Ruth soon had the opportunity to serve as an elder and begin a new learning curve of learning how to lead 'as a woman'.

> And yet with that, as a woman being part of a male leadership team I did observe, especially the other guys who came onto the eldership at the same time as me, I thought, there's something in their leadership ability which almost comes … looking as a woman at them, I would say it comes to them naturally; they're stepping into something that I am … you know there was things that they did and I thought, they do this naturally, whereas I'm having to think about it and think about how you do that and think about how you lead in that situation – and I asked them lots of questions. But

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[69] The Vineyard Movement of churches eventually changed its theological position on this: (see Anyabwile, 2006, though he writes from a critical perspective).

> I do believe that for many years men, when they were called to leadership, stepped in to a flow of history if you like, a flow of a call and a leading that then they, that they actually were able to run with and, and while it was their own call, there was something in that flow of history that impacted them and imparted something to them. I suppose in a way I'm saying it slightly stronger, they had many role models that as a woman you didn't have.

Despite the lack of role models, Ruth was determined to lead 'as a woman'.

> I see myself doing this as a woman, and I think that's the value of it, that you bring something to the table. And again it's very easy to become stereotypical when it comes to this because, you know I don't think it was the, you know the touchy feely practical thing, cause I know guys who are, you know, very like that; it's just that as a woman you do definitely think differently, you see things from a different perspective and so you bring something to the table. So I was trying to learn from the guys but then I was trying to, and we were living in days in the bigger world setting where women were rising in terms of business and all the others, and of course the big thing that was coming across in those days was, you know you have to be more male than the males to make it in business. And I thought that cannot be the way it's supposed to be in the church.

As mentioned above, this paradigm shift has not been limited to women, although their experience of it is inevitably different from that of male leaders. When Larry began leading his current church (some thirty years ago), 'it was definitely the women made the tea and the buns and that was it'. The transition to the point where women could serve as elders and could preach and teach was a major paradigm shift.

> Probably more noticed by the men, in one level, but I think, for the women it was as new people came, and of course, the kind of composite picture of the new people coming would be probably a school teacher, university educated and therefore women were coming with that sort of education and if we as a church were saying there's no role for you beyond making the tea, and we've consultant surgeons and you know, all sorts of people who in their daily jobs are, you know. So I think that was a big shift for the church.

5.2.3.4 Ireland

From the late 1960s and the Civil Rights movement to the mid 1990s and the paramilitary ceasefires which eventually paved the way for power-sharing government in

Belfast, Northern Ireland experienced several decades of devastating violence during which over 3600 people were killed and thousands more injured (BBC, 2017).

Factional conflict intensified and complicated the theological divisions between Protestants and Catholics. The leadership of several of the leaders in this research was forged during this time of deep division and against a background of extreme, uncompromising political views which were often intermingled with religious claims, not least on the part of some evangelicals (Bruce, 1989, 1994). These circumstances became a crucible for several of the leaders.

Vic described his pursuit of a 'pragmatic ecumenism' as he found himself working in the predominantly Roman Catholic setting of the Irish Republic. Having grown up in a Protestant town in Northern Ireland, he was ill-equipped to work in a predominantly Roman Catholic environment. Several decades of ministry in this setting have formed a crucible from which a new model of ministry emerged.

> I was beginning to think through the implications of – and it gave me the freedom to think through the implications of, of how, of what the nature of a Reformed witness would be in a predominantly Catholic context.
>
> Here I am, someone of Reformed conviction … an evangelical commitment to mission, who feels a call within the Republic of Ireland, who doesn't see his calling to make Limerick a fat church, and by that I mean simply have more and more people come to Limerick Presbyterian Church. Is that really what the Kingdom of God is all about? It must be part of something bigger.

There was a price to pay as many of his evangelical friends distanced themselves from him: a reminder that navigating the crucibles of paradigm shifts can take a toll.

One of the factors in his move from Northern Ireland to the Republic (there were several) was his 'wrestling with the political context in which we were called to minister the gospel'.[70] Along with others Vic was 'appalled at what was being done in the name

[70] This was in the middle of the 1980s.

of the gospel', not least the use of the slogan 'For God and Ulster'; in response an ad was placed in one of the main Belfast newspapers: 'For God and his Glory Alone'.[71]

At the time Vic was preaching a sermon series from the book of Jonah:

> He had a choice: to be a patriot or a prophet. And he chose to be a patriot.

Vic used this to lay down a challenge to northern evangelicals who had been called to preach into an Irish context.

> Their loyalty to the Queen was greater than their loyalty to the King and the Kingdom and has brought judgment upon us.

As well as discerning a challenge to the wider evangelical church Vic was forced to acknowledge an autobiographical application in the story. His wife suggested (and he agrees) that he was Jonah and had dumped his own prejudices and struggles on the congregation. So when 'the word of the Lord came a second time to Jonah', that meant Vic 'leaving Northern Ireland and seeking ministry in the Republic of Ireland'.

Noel, the youngest leader in the research, grew up in a strongly Loyalist/Protestant area of Belfast. The fact that he never met a Roman Catholic until he was fifteen gives an indication of the segregation that existed in certain parts of Northern Ireland. He has recently studied the leadership of Gerry Adams[72] for a degree project and as part of that studied Republican and Irish history.

> I came out of that saying one of the big needs in our country is that our history, our children, need to be educated rightly on our history; so we can't continue with the Protestant school teaching British history and the Catholic school teaching Irish history. This is not healthy.

His changing attitude to Roman Catholics has also been influenced by people he has met and has helped to develop an outreach programme which seeks to appeal across sectarian divisions by being neither overtly Catholic nor Protestant: 'let's get back to the

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[71] The phrase was adopted by ECONI (now renamed as Contemporary Christianity) and became the title of a booklet that was recently republished.

[72] A key figure in the recent history of Irish Republicanism.

main thing here: Jesus'. The organisation Noel helps to lead has an intentional all-Ireland vision.

I suggested that his personal transformation had been important for this.

> I think in the last few years in study and reflection and stuff, it's put me in a better place to have conversations with people down south in terms of my language, wording, histories, to sit in a pub in Dublin with a bunch of guys having a curry and to talk about Irish history and their eyes are like saucers. So that's been a helpful thing.

Ruth provides one further illustration of this paradigm shift. Her church[73] was concerned and praying about the sectarian divisions.

> If you're living in a divided, sectarian community, what is it that's going to reach and make a difference and see people come to Christ?
>
> The fellowship was birthed in prayer, so prayer was very much part of our DNA and we did pray a lot and we prayed a lot for the country. And in the context of praying and I would say prophetically God speaking to us, you know we started to see that some of these issues were in our own hearts … a sectarian spirit and an attitude towards Catholics in particular. And out of that came a desire, could we meet with some Catholics?

They did, and began to talk, meet and pray together, continuing consistently over the years of the Troubles.

5.2.3.5 Cost of new paradigms

These crucibles involved pain and several of the leaders experienced the cost of changed views and paradigm shifts. Vic's pragmatic ecumenism led him to become *persona non grata* among some of his friends. Larry had to be prepared to risk his leadership on the issue of congregational worship. Geoff had to 'take the hit' as he led a new model of ministry. Ruth and her church discovered that in reaching out to Roman Catholics they burned bridges with their own community: these subsequently have had to be rebuilt ('a much harder challenge').

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[73] An independent charismatic church: see the reference in 4.2.2 to these churches' more ecumenical openness.

Yet as they navigated these paradigm shifts, these leaders forged new identities and new models of ministry.

5.2.4 Travel and living overseas

A fourth type of new territory was spending time overseas: a literal form of new territory. Slightly more than half of the leaders talked about experiences of living outside their own country. In some instances these were no more than visits (not to say that these did not have significant impact) while for others it meant living in a different country for a period of time.

Frank lived in Senegal for several years where he led a missionary team. He described the first three and a half years as 'completely bonkers'.

> The whole experience of living in Africa was so formative, and so exciting, wonderful, terrifying, simultaneously, that to isolate the one event and what affect that had is hard. But they're all part of, part of a process.

Travel has provided the setting for developing a new model of ministry (Vic) or new insight; it has also involved hardship, and has led to a sense of stripping.

Again, there were several aspects to this crucible.

5.2.4.1 Hardship and living overseas

> I think sometimes when people are in another culture, small things become bigger and small issues are magnified, and that certainly is what happened to me (Graham).

The introduction to this section referred to Frank's 'completely bonkers' experience in Africa. A combination of serious family illness, the birth of a child, building a house and learning a language contributed to the hardness of the experience. He persevered, not least out of a fear of how his sending church might have reacted had he decided to return home!

He also had to lead his team while the country endured a military coup and just a couple of weeks later the area director of his mission was killed in a plane crash. Frank regards himself as good at crisis management and feels satisfied with how he led his team through this trauma (although identifying his boss and his boss's wife after the crash was the most difficult thing he has ever had to do). He did not collapse emotionally,

although 'I was desperately ready to leave when I left … 5 months later. I was pretty stressed by then.'

Chapter 6 will return to Frank's experience and its impact on him.

Steve, one of two Americans in the research, talked about the six-year period he and his family spent living and working in Hungary. The move came about as he questioned whether his roots (in America) were too deeply planted. There was also the appeal of a spiritual adventure and the desire to take more risks.

> But I really wanted to be some place where, if the Holy Spirit was not at work, it wouldn't happen … I found all that in Budapest.

On one hand, working in Europe suited his temperament and leadership style. However, while he looks back warmly at aspects of the six years spent there, he also acknowledges the hardness of the experience ('probably six of the hardest years of my life').

There had been an initial excitement upon arriving in a new country, but the challenges of language learning were painful.

> The language study was a, specially trying to learn Hungarian, was, that's a crucible in itself. My personality is the way I respond to crucibles and crises and hardship is that I get despondent and depressed. I don't kind of get more active and take the bull by the horns … I'm more melancholy in that way.

The difficulty was compounded by isolation. Steve would have returned home sooner, but believed it would have been unfair to move his family. He understood the choice to stay longer as a spiritual challenge whereby he would choose to put others' interests before his own.

Graham, who is recognized as a highly effective communicator, described a specific aspect of hardship when he recalled the painful impact of moving to South America.

> Part of the challenge for a communicator and a leader and a preacher is you don't realise it until you don't have it, but when you can't speak the language of the people you're working with, it's like an amputation … It was a part of things being stripped away, and almost like starting again in ministry.

Despite the difficulties, at times the crucible of overseas living also brought opportunities to gain new insights.

5.2.4.3 New insight

Steve addressed the positive ways in which the crucible had changed him.

> You can't live in a foreign … culture without your own thinking, thinking of your own culture being changed. It's given us a whole different, new light on life here. What is valuable, it's a bigger view of the church, the Christian life.

(Chapter 6 will further explore how crucibles have the potential to contribute positively to shaping a leader's character and relationship with God.)

Tim also learned through time spent overseas, having spent three months in Africa in the context of a church whose members were mainly first generation Christians.

> And I'm landed in here with no crutches. All of the stuff that I am used to having round me isn't there where I'm finding myself ministering to these people … and learning from them and actually being able to explore my own faith, not my church's or my family's faith.

Daylight had gone by 6pm and there was nothing to do besides listen to music, read the Bible and commentaries and write letters.

> [It] was deeply shaping for me and I came back from that a very, very different person.

5.2.4.4 Other

Other participants also referred to experiences that had occurred away from home, whether these were significant turning points (Brian)[74] or having one's eyes opened to 'global needs' (Noel).

Robert Thomas used the term 'new territory' to describe the first type of crucible. This section has described the new territory experiences of conversion, leadership itself, paradigm shifts and living overseas.

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[74] There is nothing to say that Brian's Christian life would not have 'taken off' in Ireland: however, the fact is that it was in a setting far from home that it did.

The second broad type of crucible is 'reversals'.

5.3 Reversals

Leaders inevitably face challenges and setbacks. Sometimes these are personal, such as personal loss or a family issue; at other times they are leadership-related, such as church conflicts or rejection as a leader. It is not always easy to distinguish between a personal and a leadership crisis as the sources and implications of the crisis may be both personal and professional.

5.3.1 Personal circumstances

Personal setbacks and loss are crucibles that may contribute to the leader's shaping.

5.3.1.1 Loss

A striking feature of the research was to listen to widely contrasting stories about the leaders' fathers. Several considered their father as a highly influential mentor-type figure;[75] others noted the relatively early loss of their father and the impact that had on them.[76]

Brian, whose leadership journey has to some extent been a journey away from independence, talked about the impact of the loss of his father.

> If we step right back I think for me anyway one of the most significant things in my life was the death of my father when I was only 17, and the impact that had on our family, leaving my mother with three boys: 17, 15 and 7 – to raise on her own at a relatively young age (50s). That helped – well whether it helped or hindered I don't know – but I think I became very independent at that stage in my life and had to learn to make decisions without necessarily … the detriment there was that I made a lot of decisions without really confiding in anybody. I became very much self-determined and that was a weakness personally I believe.

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[75] More will be said about this in chapter 6.

[76] Note the discussion in Barling (2014, pp.124, 127ff.).

Somewhat in contrast was Graham's experience. An only child, he lost his father at eight: this loss was the catalyst for Brian accepting more responsibility. He recalls people telling him that he would be looking after his mother: a challenge that he took seriously.

> As I look back on my life, I actually think that was a hugely important factor in the leadership development.

His loss was intensified when his mother died from cancer while he was at university. Graham has been able to see this as part of God's preparation and pastoral formation.

Frank not only experienced the loss of his father ('something that was very formative'), but recalled that his mother had been emotionally unstable. Teenage years were difficult and family finances were very limited.

> I think part of what I realised through all that was that, you know, life is sometimes tough. You just got to keep going. Made me the man I am.

Probably the most dramatic loss discussed was when Tim's girlfriend died as a result of a tragic accident. It was a profound experience that left him struggling. The church failed him and had it not been for a small number of close friends it would have been a worse disaster. As Tim recalled, the crucible led him to a point of desperate dependency on God.

> [A few months later] I had gone down hill personally; spiritually I was really, really alert. You know I knew what it was to literally cling to God. I used to sit with my Bible and … I literally said to God every morning 'I am not going into [work] until I've heard you speak.'

Tim's reaction to this loss illustrates how crucibles relate to a leader's spirituality: this is a theme that will be developed in chapter 6. It should also be observed that what Tim drew from his experience helped equip him for later pastoral leadership.

> And the only positive I can take from that is that when I became a pastor I knew what it was like to sit with people who were dealing with tragedy.

It is important to recognise that although intense crucible experiences have the potential to shape leaders, they may also be very painful. While Tim was eventually able to draw from his crucible, the pain was profound.

> Isaiah was the big – the journey through Isaiah was massive for me at that time. But emotionally I was going down and I'd some really good friends thankfully who were around me, but the biggest thing I was struggling with was the concept of a relationship with anybody in the future. Because, I mean, this just hurts too much. To lose someone like this hurts too much; I don't want to do that again.

For each of these leaders, the experience of loss played a part in their shaping. The results were not always positive (Brian's independence), but in some cases contributed to the development of resilience and of pastoral sensitivity.

5.3.1.2 Reversal of plans

Larry described how his undergraduate years resulted in a defining moment. He had set his mind on becoming a social worker – a role in which he believed he could serve God. However an administrative error interrupted his plans.

> My life was turned upside down … [Social work] was something I was interested in and therefore I made the assumption that God would be pleased about that and told him what I was going to do in his name. That to me was quite a strong, actually, defining moment because the concept then of saying, trying to listen to God and saying, God, what do you want me to do was a completely new thing for me. It may seem naive, but it was a completely new thing. So that was a direction, I actually had to pray about it, you know, instead of just, oh, I'd fancy that!

Not only were his plans interrupted, but he also began to understand his relationship with God in a new way.

5.3.1.3 Family

Aside from loss there were other family-related crucibles.

> It is one thing coping with leadership challenges in the church, but there's a totally different dynamic when it's a challenge you're facing in your own family or your marriage. It is … of a different dimension altogether. I've often said to [my wife], you know I really feel it's family is our Achilles heel (Graham).

Clearly a personal crucible, such as a family issue, has wider implications for a leader.

> I think the times when I have been nearest to walking away from leadership have been family crisis … That impacts your ministry greatly because it's all-consuming when it's

> your family. In those years there was so much pain that I wondered was I being hypocritical in terms of leading: you know, should you just not stand down and stop (Ruth)?

Steve described one of his most painful experiences that was also family-related: his recently-married daughter's husband was sentenced to prison on false charges.

> Something happened inside me: I basically kind of crossed my arms and turned my back on God and I said, 'I am not playing with you anymore, 'cos you hurt me.' And I was devastated. I, I could not have thought of anything more painful at that moment … I was angry, I was deeply angry at God and that anger was spilling out towards my daughter.

Chapter 6 will discuss the relationship between such hardship experiences and Steve's and Ruth's relationship with God.

A specific concern for some of the leaders was when their children did not appear to follow their faith. One leader referred to children going through a phase as 'prodigals'. Another described having 'issues' in his relationship with God over his children:

> I have very big issues there at the moment … if I'm honest, constantly I'm asking God why he's not answering prayer over my children who are lost, and I struggle with it at the moment.

Another spoke of his disappointment, having imagined his children growing up as keen evangelical Christians: 'it just hasn't turned out like that'. He contemplated resignation when his unmarried daughter became pregnant.

> If you can't lead your own family, how can you lead anybody else?
>
> It makes me feel a whole lot of things. One is, have I not given adequate time to my family? Would I have done that differently again?

At the same time he realises that there is a swathe of younger people who profess Christianity but who have disengaged from structural faith and who lack deeply-held Christian values.

Graham experienced several significant family-related crucibles while living overseas. The move had been 'a massive change' and a previous section noted the 'stripping' that came about as a result of not being able to communicate in the local language.

An invitation to be involved in church planting some distance from home meant time away from his family.

> I remember it, the stress of this, trying to juggle being a husband, being a father, being a pastor, being a leader … trying to, I suppose, maybe, having the feeling that you were doing things that were really going to count. All of that became a huge stress and tension within me. So much so that in the house we lived in in the centre of the city there was a basement … the floor was covered with sawdust and … I went down there and just broke, and I remember lying in the sawdust, just weeping my heart out … and just saying: God, 'I can't cope with this, and this is just so, so stressful' … And it was a death, and I'll tell you what died. I began to recognise, to my shame, something I hadn't recognised before … we'd been married eight years and had four kids, and what I realised then in a way I never had was this: I was actually still trying to live like a bachelor, rather than live as a married man. And that was a painful recognition and acknowledgment, but it was a turning point, actually. And it was an acceptance that actually part of being a Christian and part of being a leader is loving your wife, loving your family and giving them the attention that they need. And that was a turning point … I sometimes think a miracle happened in the sawdust, and that's what it was.

Another leader recalled how his marriage had almost failed because of his 'extraordinary success'.

> There is something … that with … with my personality … my ego was being stroked … The more they stroked me, the more I did. So I was working 90 hours a week, I was calculating … [My wife] was at home with these two children. I was using it as a B and B. There was not a coffee morning I didn't bless with my presence. I sometimes had to preach three times a week, maybe two funerals, and I'd never buried anyone, I'd never married anyone; I'd never celebrated a communion … suddenly I was a world expert overnight.

While he was 'on a roll' his wife was wondering how God could possibly bless him. People in the church thought he was a spiritual giant but meantime, 'we're falling apart at home'.

> What is so awful … I was on such a roll, I wasn't even dealing with this darkness in [my wife]. It was almost as if it was at a different level. I could live on these two worlds.

Both of these stories touch on the relationship between the leader's calling and character: this too will be explored in chapter 6.

5.3.1.4 Spiritual crisis

Several leaders discussed unusual spiritual experiences that had been significant during their leadership journey. More space will be given to these in chapter 6 and it should be noted that their outcome tended to be quite positive. However not all of them were pain-free, as this account demonstrates.

> I can only describe it as a profoundly painful experience, and it was a death to something and I don't even fully understand what was dying, but I know anything that I thought was holding me back from going deeper with God I wanted to let go of and I wanted to die to anything, to sin in my life, to shadow mission, to being a people-pleaser, to having a reputation, just anything. I wanted to be utterly clean before God and I just wept. It was – I couldn't stop it. Something was being broken within me (Graham).

A friend suggested that 'sometimes at a time like this, it isn't just something dying, but it's actually a new birth and something's being born'. Within a month he was invited to accept a senior leadership role in the denomination.

> I really thought back to that and I thought actually, unknown to me, this was part of God's preparation of me for a new phase and a new dimension of ministry and leadership.
>
> It was definitely a crucible. One of the most painful experiences of my life.

Others referred to times when they came under what they have interpreted as spiritual attack. Sometimes it has been intensely personal: one leader described how he has to deal with suicidal[77] thoughts ('I hear the voice of the enemy regularly … every day'), while others attributed difficulties in their churches to spiritual attack.

5.3.2 Leadership setbacks

Having noted the personal nature of some of the crucible experiences, it is clear that on other occasions the setbacks or challenges relate directly to the leader *as a leader*. Most leaders need to deal with conflict or challenges to their leadership; disappointment or

[77] He assured me that if these ever settled in his mind, he would seek help.

frustration form further crucibles and some leadership crucibles come in the shape of rejection.

As already mentioned, it is not always possible to distinguish between personal and leadership setbacks since the leader's personal life will influence his or her leadership and vice versa. This was illustrated in Brian's story of opposition to his leadership.

5.3.2.1 Opposition

Brian described a crucible he experienced quite early in his leadership as a pastor. It illustrates several ways in which crucibles function and will be referred to further in chapter 6.

Although he believes that God has guided him in various ways, Brian is typical of many evangelicals in his desire to have a clear 'word from the Lord', traceable to the Bible.[78] However, this was missing when he came to make what was arguably the most significant decision in his leadership journey: accepting a call to the pastorate of Faith Baptist Church in Belfast. He recalled that when it came to making the decision, 'God never spoke to me in a confirmation way.' Although there were circumstantial factors that led to his accepting the call, he realised that he had based previous important decisions on 'a word from the Lord', but this had not happened at this point.

It began to be an issue when Brian started to believe that an influential member of the church didn't really want him there. This was exacerbated in that this individual was part of the leadership team. Meetings were difficult and eventually Brian 'almost broke down' and had to take three months off work. The break proved to be a turning point.

> I went up on a mountain for half a day and I just cried unto the Lord. In that, up to that point I had made a decision to go to Faith Baptist but he hadn't spoken to me clearly about it. So I went up unto that mountain and it so happens that I got this word three times at that period, in different ways. 2 Timothy 4: 'Preach the word in season, out of season … I have called you', you know, all of that. The Lord stood at my side, you know?

[78] The concept of being guided by God is one of the themes discussed in chapter 6.

The result of this experience was a confirmation of Brian's calling:

> Because what it proved to me was once I knew God had me there – and he spoke to me very clear, three times from that passage, the word of the Lord to me – so I knew I was in the right place and I would just have to pray through it and work through it. And that's what happened.

While the experience ultimately resulted in a strengthening of Brian for his task of leadership, there were other lessons.

> It made me aware that … no one likes not to be liked or rejected, basically. And that made me very vulnerable, but it also once again forced me to trust God implicitly. So, first and foremost, 'Lord, am I in the right place? And show me if there's something in my make-up that is a stumbling block.'
>
> I suppose, I mean, first and foremost it once again underlined for me the fact that, although I was perplexed, couldn't understand why this sort of animosity was there, God knew all about it. God was in control and the challenge for me was not to allow the devil a hold in the church through personalities or whatever.

Not only did this crucible experience lead to reassurance in relation to Brian's sense of call, his own assessment is that it contributed to his sense of trust in God and an awareness of the need to pay attention to his character. It also alerted him to the reality of spiritual conflict.

Interestingly he claims that this crucible experience was more personal than the loss of a baby he and his wife experienced in that it raised the question of whether there was something about his character that needed attention.

> You know, was there something about me that in some way was responsible, or was it, you know, it made me really think through my own testimony, my own character.

Steve also talked about a time when his leadership was questioned, sending him into 'an emotional tailspin'.

> Emotionally I just went into a depression; [I] felt like a failure.

He felt that he was powerless to change in ways that would have improved his leadership.

The resolution came about at a conference and turned out to have nothing to do with learning improved leadership techniques.

> And it was at that conference that the realisation that I had very little concept of the realities of the gospel on a functional level … and it was almost like a conversion all over again. There was a night and day difference between one day and the next. But it was just the realisation of God coming and meeting me and communicating to me that I was valued because of the finished work of Christ. I was loved. It had nothing to do with my performance. And that was, to say that was life-changing is an understatement.

A realisation of God's love proved to be something of a recurring theme across the interviews and will be discussed in chapter 6.

5.3.2.2 Conflict

By definition conflict is relational, and for some leaders it is broken relationships that cause the greatest leadership pain.

> In terms of church, that's the only time I've ever thought, this is so hard, why would anybody ever want to do this. Because of the emotional impact that it has on you (Ruth).

A previous section in the chapter has noted some of the leaders' paradigm shifts that were particular to their historical setting against the backdrop of Northern Ireland's 'Troubles'; for Stuart the Troubles were the background to a serious conflict that in some ways defined a significant element of his leadership.

The Orange Order is a Protestant Society that draws its name from King William III of Orange and which sees its role as defending Protestantism.[79] While attempts have been made by its members to establish its evangelical credentials (Mitchel, 2003, p.142), its relationship with the evangelical church is ambivalent, with some church leaders openly involved and others choosing to distance themselves.

Stuart found himself in conflict with them.

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[79] Mitchel (2003, p.142) cites the following claim from a member of the Independent Loyal Orange Order: 'I can state quite categorically that we exist primarily for the defence and promotion of Biblical Protestantism, and that our heartbeat is essentially religious.'

> My conflicts with them, they were seminal, they were really hard, hard times. So I was thrown back on God on many occasions.

While he had never been either a believer in or an opponent of the Orange Order (he had conducted 'Orange' church services, though was never comfortable with them), an intense conflict developed when he disapproved of a service where the Orange flags and standards would be paraded in the church.

> It was the time they began to introduce carrying their standards and their flags. Some districts that never had them before introduced the Ulster flag, the Orange standard and the Union flag and all these were received by the minister at an Orange service at which they had virtual control of… it became an Orange service.
>
> And really it was a, it was a [political] demonstration … And that time [our church] was reaching out into the community and we had people of all faiths and none coming.
>
> And then this group came in, demanding that I would receive their flags, their standards. And the Ulster flag … was a political flag. It wasn't the flag of, the old Ulster flag; it was the flag with the crown in it. All hell was let loose. The session, special session meetings were called.

The first year the service took place but Stuart absented himself and arranged for another preacher who would not mind conducting the service to preside.

> When it came to the next year and the Orange wanted the service I said on no account. And it went to a vote and I was determined if I didn't get 2/3 majority that I would resign. I wasn't going to do this. Our session – and there were quite a number of Orangemen in it … voted, I think about 28 to 4, in that ratio anyway not to have the Orange service. And people who voted against it were some of the Orangemen.
>
> Well, of course, deputations came from the congregation to the session. What they didn't say about me, it was powerful. But – and of course headlines, Newsletter:[80] 'Presbyterian congregation bans union flag' (we didn't ban the Union flag, we banned the whole lot coming in).

Respite came in the form of a two-week residential that was part of doctoral studies.

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[80] A Belfast-based newspaper, read primarily by Protestants.

> Was I ever glad to get away. I got away, but away, really… there were times when [my wife] and I just wept … the pressure was so bad.

Some of the church committee members were deeply unhappy. However, a year later the church held a mission and several of those involved in the conflict were converted.[81]

Stuart's stance on this became a defining moment in his leadership and had required considerable courage since he was tackling an issue that affected a significant number of people in the church, for many of whom the annual Orange parades had been part of childhood memories. He had become convinced that it was 'incomprehensible that we should have the gospel identified with an organisation that has a history, an origin, and a life such as it has'.

This conflict became a defining moment in his leadership journey and helped crystallise what was central to his call. This point will be discussed further in chapter 6.

While the crucible of conflict contributed to the crystallising of some of his leadership priorities and in that sense produced 'gold', it should not be forgotten that conflict exacts a price. Yet Stuart believes that it is a price that leaders need to be prepared to pay.

> It also weakened – it had a weakening effect as well. It was conflict. I'm like everybody else. I think no Christian courts conflict … most of us don't. We'd run a mile to avoid it. But definitely in the ministry, and in leadership, there has to come a point where you can go and no further.

5.3.2.3 Rejection

Simon's leadership journey has included painful experiences of rejection from the leadership of two churches. In the first, among contributing factors, he acknowledges that he was not equipped to understand the dynamics at work in the church.

> I was completely unprepared. Again, I was still, in my head, more of an academic than I even realised.

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[81] Apparently a number of the church's members had a fairly nominal adherence to the church and to evangelical faith.

He believes that failure was almost inevitable. The church needed to change and even though the change would be small, it would feel much bigger.

> They could have called Tim Keller[82] and the same thing would have happened … I had to be the idiot that walked in to play that role at that point in the church's history'.

Opposition began to manifest itself ('people who just despised me and resented me as a threat') and some elders began to meet secretly 'to rescue the church' from the other elders and from Simon. The conspiracy came to light when minutes of a meeting were accidentally sent to a church staff member.

Simon persevered until the team of elders was sufficiently solid to confront the dissenters. But he had had no inclination to stay on beyond this turning point.

> I lost heart … I did not have the inner resilience to go beyond those five years. I felt like I had run a marathon. I stumbled across the finish line, handed the baton to the session and they had fresh legs … I'd completely lost heart.

Although he is disappointed to admit that he had lost heart – that is how he interprets what happened – an alternative interpretation is that he was more resilient than he realises and had actually done well to survive as long as he had, giving up only when there was a sense that his work there was complete.

> I just had this deep sense that I couldn't hand the church over to those guys. It just wouldn't be right. That would not be right before the Lord: I mean, how can I do that? How could I give this precious ministry vehicle of gospel ministry … over to guys who were sneaky?

Three months after leaving this church he accepted a call to another church where he stayed three years before submitting a (forced) resignation. Ideally he should have waited longer before assuming a new role, but he was unable to afford a longer break.

> I was a better pastor [here] than I was at [the previous church]. I did much better; I was wiser, I was better informed, I understood better. And it was just horrible.

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[82] Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian in New York: a church which has grown in numbers and influence since its small beginnings in 1989.

He was accused of being autocratic ('I'd seen autocratic, I know autocratic and I am not autocratic'). After three years, he resigned.

> We were really in trouble at that point. That's when, for the fist time in my life, the thought occurred to me, maybe I've been wrong all along. Maybe God doesn't love me; maybe he hates my guts … 'cos look at the facts… my life looks like Berlin in 1945. I had to go back down and rethink everything; I was completely exhausted. I could not be more discouraged. My dad died right in the middle of it all.'
>
> I was in profound self-doubt, I was scared; I thought I must be some kind of horrible, poisonous human being to have been treated like this. Because they didn't just run me out, I realise now there were things that were said and done that were abusive. They were abuses of power within the church, toward me. And … again I'd never experienced anything like that; I didn't have a category for it at the time, but these dear friends gathered around us … and just gave us time and friendship, they gave us their presence and comfort, and over the next 6 months or so, it just grew into a Bible study I found myself leading, and … so that by that summer there were about 40 people coming to this Sunday night group and they began to say … 'Do we want to start a church?'

Eventually they started the church that Simon currently leads.

Chapter 6 will explore the 'gold' that eventually emerged from Simon's crucible of rejection. However, as already observed, the eventual emergence of something of value should not detract from the severe pain of such events: in this case Simon had been left bewildered and embarrassed.

> I was embarrassed that my ministry in [the denomination] was done… I was embarrassed with my friends [who were] hitting home runs every Sunday and I would go from preaching to, you know, 1000-1200 people … to preaching to 35 people on a Sunday night.

Simon believes that he experienced the patience of God who reassured him and re-established him in ministry. He is also grateful for friends who helped to re-establish him.

> The human agency for my salvation in a way has been this church. I don't think they even know how much they mean to me. Because they just treated me decently, they

> were kind and affirming, they believed in me and treated me so well and so sweetly. I have come to realise we only know ourselves within community.
>
> They will never know the many times during the week when I was in my study when … I wept because I didn't know how not to. I didn't even know why I was weeping at that particular moment. I couldn't control the anguish and sorrow within; it just poured out many times. It was probably … some kind of … post-traumatic stress.'

5.3.2.4 Gender

A previous section discussed the issue of gender as a paradigm shift for several leaders in the research. Two of the leaders in the research have led as women. Ruth noted the contrast in her situation with the men who became elders at the same time as she did, observing that there was something in their leadership ability that 'almost came naturally'. Her challenge was to learn how to lead *as a woman*: this was not easy given the scarcity of role models (in contrast to what was available to men).

Meanwhile Shirley found herself leading in a male-dominated institution and was aware of gender-related antagonism.

> I had incredible opposition from some of the young ministers who didn't want me there. And it really went to the heart of your self-worth.
>
> It was horrendous, it was horrendous. You were treated like a piece of dirt under their foot. [It was] to do with gender … Very early on God gave me a very clear sense of 'don't ever fight them on the gender issue. Side-step it every time'. And it was the absolute key to me being able to do my job.

While the antagonism bothered her she does not regard it as the most difficult crucible she has had to navigate (health issues and singleness have been more difficult). 'It never made me really angry, because I was so secure in the call', an interesting statement to read in the light of Francis' (1992) suggestion that women who successfully penetrate previously male-dominated organisations are more tough-minded than their male counterparts. However Maldonado and Davis' comment about women who work in an atmosphere where they constantly have to prove themselves (2015, p.48) is also pertinent.

A more subtle aspect of the gender crucible was evident in the experiences of leaders' wives who were implicated in their husbands' leadership calling. At times this

involvement was positive (Tim's wife has had an important role in helping him to discern his calling), but at times it was negative (seen in the examples of both Graham and Vic and their admission of neglecting their family).[83]

5.3.2.5 Disappointment

Disappointment can have the effect of causing a leader to question the value of their leadership.

Geoff retired prematurely from leadership for health reasons. Of the five churches he led, the last represented the most difficult leadership challenge.

> I think there's a disappointment about [my last church] … The feeling I have is of a church right up to two or three weeks ago not at ease with itself.
>
> What am I disappointed in? Those elders wouldn't tackle some of those issues that I wanted to tackle … And the very thing I said to them at an elders' meeting, I'm now thinking, they should have dealt with that. So there's a disappointment; things that should have been tackled weren't.
>
> I think it still works in me. I think that hasn't worked itself out. I think I still live with that, overshaded, is it masked by the successes of the [other churches]? You know I'm, trying to think that through as I sit here.

In addition, one of the churches he led previously suffered a dramatic haemorrhaging of members during the ministry of his successor. That too is a disappointment.

However he recognised the potential of a significant lesson in this.

> I think [my last church] and the [second one] is a good lesson for me because if I hadn't have had those, it could have been like a big success story. And that's [Henri] Nouwen, you see, who's saying, using your words, the crucible, you learn more in that. But I think I have more to learn as I maybe process [it]. That not everything confronted will turn out the way you want … And that's good for me, maybe, to cope with that disappointment.

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[83] Note also Ian's comment earlier in the chapter on causing his wife sleepless nights.

This section has suggested that crucibles of reversal can occur in personal circumstances such as loss, reversal of plans, or family crisis, or in more directly leadership-related situations such as conflict, rejection and disappointment.

Some of the leaders have demonstrated a significant degree of resilience in persevering in their leadership through various reversals.

5.4 Isolation

The third type of crucible suggested by Thomas is 'suspensions', although as already explained, I have chosen to use Clinton and Trebesch's term *isolation* to describe this form of crucible.

Trebesch suggested (1997, p.79) that 'more than 90% of leaders will face one or more important isolation times in their lives'. She defined isolation as 'the setting aside of a leader from normal ministry or leadership involvement due to involuntary causes for a period of time sufficient enough to cause and/or allow serious evaluation of life and ministry' (p.79).

In reality she extends this definition beyond 'involuntary causes' to include voluntary isolation, such as times when a leader may step back from active ministry in order to seek renewal or pursue education.

A prolonged setback or reversal can effectively lead to isolation, blurring the line between these two types of crucible. Thus the setback experienced by Brian, as discussed above, effectively became a crucible of isolation as he took three months away from work, during which time he was able to establish his sense of calling.

The theme of isolation evokes the biblical theme of wilderness. Israel's wilderness experience represented a time of vulnerability (Brueggemann, 2002, p.231). It was a place of testing where the depth of Israel's faith would be revealed. Closely associated with this is the theme of exile: 'Filtered through exile, the wilderness … became a way of understanding the condition of faith that trusts in YHWH alone because no other adequate source of life exists …' (Brueggemann, 2002, p.232). Yet, as Brueggemann goes on to point out, the wilderness tradition also carries a 'honeymoon' element, a time of 'pure trust and therefore joy' (2002, p.232).

5.4.1 Illness

Several leaders referred to experiences of illness that had caused them to be removed from their ministry involvement.

Shirley's ministry has been punctuated by health issues. During the longest season of her leadership (leading a denominational department), she was off work seven times for surgery.

> And that was deeply frustrating to me because I … hated being off work. It also though, highlighted, I would never have thought of myself as a control freak, but I've realised there's a bit of the control freak in all of us, probably.

More recently she has had to deal with a season of ME, which delayed the launch of her new ministry. She noted that in the worst phases of the illness it is hard to think there will ever be an improvement.

> I suppose in that first year it was a year of … I don't know, was it a year of God purifying me? … Quite possibly, because it was a year when it felt like every single bit of scaffolding was knocked away, every inch of it.

The 'scaffolding' consisted of her sense of call, her love of life and ministry and the fact that, to an extent, she was what she did.

> [What I did] was integral to who I was because that was … the passionate call in my life: that was where I was at my deepest sense of joy and so all that was gone and with the prospect that I would never again, really thought I would never again be able to be involved in any sort of ministry.

She recalled a sense of sadness and frustration - 'will I ever get back to being who I was?'; and there was fear of what would become of her.

> 'My question was more – well, why, Lord?'

During this 'dark night of the soul' it was reading that helped her begin to get a sense of what God does in dark places.

> So I look back on that … and see, well, God was doing a work there that he couldn't do in any other way.

Reflecting further on the work God does in 'dark places' she said,

> I realise the only reason I can do what I do today is because God allowed me to go to the darkest place and in that darkest place revealed himself to me. And only in that dark place was he able to do a work in me that's allowing me to be effective.

Vic recalled two instances of serious illness which both came in the years prior to his retirement.

> I had an amazing experience of God. Post-operative, I'm lying … very ill and they're working with me … and I remember lying, thinking I am dying and - you know that expression Paul uses about the love of God being poured into your heart by the Holy Spirit? Well, this was the time this happened to me. I felt so loved, so completely enveloped with his love and his presence that all fear was cast away and I thought … 'if I'm dying, this is great' … That sense of God's presence and his immediacy and his care was just wonderful'

Recovery from surgery was difficult, as he had to learn to speak again. His wife had hoped that he would emerge from the experience with a greater desire to know what it meant to be loved and to love God. While clearly this was not absent, Vic was keen to be able to 'do' rather than simply 'be'. 'I need to be able to preach again.'

A further serious health issue contributed to Vic's retirement, another aspect of the isolation theme, which will be discussed in the next section.

Geoff also experienced illness that led to (early) retirement from leadership when his doctor encouraged him to step down from his role and 'do something you would really love to do'. This has led to involvement in mentoring younger leaders. While he welcomes the redirection in his career, he acknowledges the sense of vulnerability that comes from illness.

Recalling the seven weeks he spent in hospital, he said:

> Felt vulnerable, but d'you know what? I actually felt, don't want to go back to the pastorate. It was like a switch came on, and I don't want to preach every Sunday, something that I'd done for forty years.

> I would say in the vulnerability of [the health issues] … you know, that gave me time to think and pray … and be ministered to by one or two who said to me … the confrontational warrior in me has to be directed to prayer now and not to people.

5.4.2 Dark night of the soul/wilderness

In discussing her experience of illness, Shirley had referred to it as a 'dark night of the soul', noting that it had been essential preparation for her work.

Vic used the term slightly differently, referring to his 'theological dark night of the soul', a 'crisis of faith' that lasted for several months:

> I couldn't sleep, I lost weight which for me was [a waste?] 'cos I do enjoy my food. And I became tetchy and difficult and [my wife] knew there was something desperately wrong. But in God's providence it was necessary. It's almost like a theological wilderness in order, you know, to see him, who he is.

Light dawned as he listened to a well-known preacher engage in public prayer.

> He has this amazing gift of prayer, public prayer, where he is able to communicate in prayer and sense of transcendence and immanence, of immediacy and awe, all at the same time. And what he did was he brought me into the presence of a God who was more wonderful than the God of whom I could speak. And I remember going up to speak to him and I just wept, I just wept. It was as a turning point in my life of God's incomparable greatness.

It was not the only 'wilderness' in Vic's experience: his move from the limelight of a successful ministry to the obscurity of a church in the Republic of Ireland came about from his own wrestling with the Northern Ireland political situation (as discussed in an earlier section), but also because of a need to develop in maturity.

> I had not the spiritual maturity, I didn't even think, now looking back, I had even the social, personal maturity, even though that was not the impression that was being created. And therefore, wilderness was necessary for me.

5.4.3 Family responsibility

Section three has already discussed how family issues have been crucibles for some of the leaders. One further aspect needs to be mentioned at this point.

Ruth, the only mother in the research, discussed a phase when her ministry opportunities were limited by family circumstances.

> I think I definitely found a frustration in that. I loved being a mum, I loved being a stay-at-home mum. I had always felt that also was part of God's call in my life and felt very much when I'd had my first child, the Lord had said to me, 'You know, should you rise to be the top librarian in the country, you'll never get a more important job than being a mum.' I still believe that. So I was frustrated with myself for being frustrated.

5.4.5 Moving on

Moving on from a leadership role, whether because of transition, or retirement, can be a further form of crucible.

The mention of retirement in a discussion of leadership crucibles may appear to be out of place, given that it usually marks the end of the leader's career as a leader. However if crucibles contribute to a leader's personal development as well as their leadership development,[84] then for some this phase of life continues to furnish both challenges and lessons.

Warren Bennis considered 'the crucible of age' as 'the most exciting, demanding, curious, frightening, fulfilling, and educational of [his] life' (2010, p.199), suggesting that 'old age is another of life's many roles' (p.202). He acknowledged that his experience of old age was 'lucky' in that he was surrounded by assistants and was able to continue meaningful work.[85]

While none of the leaders spoke specifically about old age (only one of the participants was over 70), several had retired from their main leadership role. The crucible of retirement proved to be one of the unanticipated themes of the research.

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[84] I would wish to argue that leadership, not least Christian leadership, should not be separated from who the leader is. Such an emphasis means that leaders go on developing as people even when they are no longer in an official leadership role.

[85] He noted that his calendar at 85, his age when he published his memoir, was as full as it had been 30 or 40 years previously.

5.4.5.1 Retirement

Stuart, the oldest of the leaders, spoke frankly about the abruptness of a retirement which had meant moving away from a congregation he had led for over twenty years.

> Looking back, I would love to have contact with my last congregation but out of being circumspect myself, and their, I think, not being as generous as they could be, we've no contact, you know? … I think, looking at it, I think it is a bit rough just leaving with people that you knew for twenty-three and a half years, having no contact with them, apart from maybe seeing an obituary or going back for a funeral.

Nonetheless retirement was somewhat phased, with the opportunity to work as a 'pastoral associate' in another congregation.

The subsequent time period, since he entered 'real retirement' has not been easy.

> I'm not very satisfied with where I am at the moment; I feel a bit stranded at the minute … I'm not sure if I'm finishing well, and that is because I've become redundant and that's been self-imposed.

He feels that he has let too many opportunities go, leaving a gap in terms of pastoral ministry and his own preaching ministry. At seventy-four he does not believe he is being used to the extent he should have allowed. He still feels fresh: 'there's not much difference between this and ten years ago, in reality.'

He also misses a degree of structure.

> I don't have a bishop … nobody checking up on me how I'm doing either structurally or spiritually. And therefore I need to be working at these things much harder than I have been doing.

His advice to leaders approaching retirement is that they plan ahead.

> He should be planning his next 20 years because the life expectancy is no longer 70, even 80, I think that he really, or she, whoever the leader is should be setting out new goals, new aims, and the means of getting to those.

Health issues contributed to Vic's retirement and have limited the possibilities for travel and teaching that he had anticipated. At times retirement has felt painful.

> I suppose – and this is why retirement is quite painful sometimes – I just loved to be the minister of that church. I just loved those people. I loved the excitement of preaching.

He also misses the shepherding side of ministry.

> I know that's my personality as much as anything.

His experience highlights an aspect of the challenge of retirement in a way that may be more pertinent for extroverts than for introverts. Vic described how he functions in relationship with God primarily in community and then on his own. This runs against what he sees as the normal evangelical emphasis on individualism where personal time with God leads to participation in the community's life of faith.

> My whole life of faith has been ministering, worshipping, interacting with people as an extrovert, and that's been severed, which has been incredibly difficult, not just in terms of relationships, but the ability of how I relate to God now that I'm no longer within that community.

Now, with the help of a mentor, he is learning 'just to be' in the presence of God ('Protestants don't know how to *be* in the presence of God').

> I'm on a learning curve with this, this is part of my development.

He anticipates that this may become a theme in his ministry, helping others 'out of my own struggles': retirement may be a necessary part of that.

> Perhaps the retirement is a necessary part of that. Because I no longer am constantly doing. I know what God wants from me; he doesn't need me at all, he just takes delight in me, I don't have to do anything.

5.4.5.3 Loss of status

In describing his experience of stepping down from a key leadership role, Frank spoke of 'regret' in leaving previous roles, not least two high profile leadership posts.

> Because of your status you get invited to big meetings, you fly around the world, you're in on the important decisions and that sort of thing: it's hard to leave that. Frank didn't get invited to these things but the director of [the mission] did.

In the course of the interview he mentioned a reflective essay he had written fourteen years previously. He agreed to forward a copy and this led to a short supplementary interview.

He had written about transition:

> I realise that a good deal of my self worth was tied up in having a high status job. I found value in being called, [sic] director and the encouraging remarks of colleagues … served to reinforce this value. This realisation that I was deriving a good deal of self-worth from my job, rather than from my relationship with the Father was a sobering, but important one.[86]

Interestingly, Frank had no recollection of writing this (something which raises obvious issues about the reliability of recall in qualitative interviewing), and the passage of time appears to have altered some of his perception with more significance now being attached to the loss of relationships with colleagues.

We specifically discussed how the realisation that Frank 'was deriving a good deal of self-worth' from his job, rather than from his relationship with God was 'a sobering, but important one'. Frank suggested that this was no longer an issue and the fact he had been able to include the observation in the essay was an indicator that he had moved on. Had he still been in that state of mind, he would probably not have included it.

5.4.5.4 Letting go

Ruth also reflected on relinquishing a leadership position. Although she has not formally retired as she and her husband have transitioned into new roles (they both carry the title 'pastor emeritus' in their church and have developed a worldwide itinerant ministry).

> If you think in mothering and fathering terms, I thought, I'll struggle to let go here … I thought as a mum, mother, knowing what it was like letting the girls go to university and the struggles to do that, I though I'm going to find this really hard. But I can honestly say it has been hard to adjust to our new life, but it has not been hard to let go of the leadership in terms of [the church].

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[86] This is an extract from his essay.

She contrasted her experience with the experience of a group of women who had served on a church leadership team with their husbands and who were missing being part of the team.

> What I think is, I had the privilege of being anointed and ordained and set in place and I think I stepped into an anointing of the Holy Spirit to do what God had asked me to do. Then, when it came to laying it down, it's like the grace lifts. So there was grace to do it and then, when you felt it was God's time for you to stop doing, the grace lifts.

The other women she had observed had not had the same experience and were missing their involvement as part of the leadership team.

5.4.6 Voluntary isolation

Finally in this section, it should be recognised that there may be seasons of voluntary isolation (Trebesch, 1997). Examples include personal retreat times, conferences, or seasons of training and further education.[87] Even if the gentle nature of these things may disqualify them from being described as crucibles, they have the ability to generate important defining moments or times of renewal. Stuart described how his participation in a doctoral programme was 'a time of renewal': this after more than fifteen years in ministry, at a time when he was questioning his place.

5.5 Summary

This chapter has used the three types of crucible suggested by Robert Thomas to describe the experiences of the participants.

Examples of *new territory* have included conversion, becoming a leader, paradigm shifts and travel. *Reversals* can include personal experiences of loss, family and spiritual crises. Experiences of *isolation* have included illness, and retirement.

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[87] See Hamill's (2010) discussion of lifelong learning in the Church of Ireland. 'The Church of Ireland would benefit from developing a church-wide lifelong-learning policy' (p.89). See also the discussion in Houts & Sawyer (2012) who argue that leadership is an art and cannot therefore be reduced to being learned in an academic setting.

The next chapter will attempt to evaluate the significance of crucible experiences that were described by the leaders in their interviews. The chapter will suggest that crucible experiences shape both who a leader is, in terms of character and spirituality, and the leadership to which the leader is called.

Chapter 6: DISCUSSION AND EVALUATION

6.1 Introduction and aims of the chapter

The previous chapter described a range of crucible experiences that were classified as crucibles of new territory, reversals or isolation. This chapter will discuss the main ways that crucibles appeared to contribute to the development of the leaders and their leadership. It will reflect theologically on the emerging themes and finally, in response to the research question, it will evaluate the role and significance of crucible experiences in the development of the leaders.

6.2 The significance of crucible experiences

In this section I suggest that crucible experiences functioned, broadly speaking, in two main ways in the development of the leaders in the research: first, in terms of who the leader is (character and spirituality) and second, in terms of what the leader does (the call to leadership).

6.2.1 Who the leader is: character and spirituality

6.2.1.1 Character

While it should not be viewed as the only requirement for a leader,[88] there is nonetheless wide agreement on the importance of the leader's character: 'Few would disagree that character is an indispensable component of sustainable leadership performance' (Hannah & Avolio, 2011, p.979).

[88] Conger and Hollenbeck (2010) caution that the concern to highlight the significance of character should not lead to the neglect of competence: they cite the example of Aaron Feuerstein, a leader of 'remarkable' character, who led his company into bankruptcy (p.313).

Various terms are used, ranging from authenticity (George, 2003), credibility (Kouzes and Posner, 2010), to trust and integrity (Blackaby and Blackaby, 2001), and precise definitions are debated.[89] Guinness offers this:

> As traditionally understood, from the Hebrews and Greeks onward, character is the inner form that makes anyone or anything what it is – whether a person, a wine, or a historical period … It is the essential "stuff" a person is made of, the inner reality and quality in which thoughts, speech, decision, behavior, and relations are rooted. As such, character determines behavior just as behavior demonstrates character (1999, p.12).

In the literature, care is taken to distinguish between character and charisma (Sankar, 2003), between character and virtue, or between character and values (Wright and Goodstein, 2007). Brinkmann (2010) contends that the historical movement from pre-modernity, through modernity, to post-modernity is marked by a shift in ways of self-interpretation, from character, through personality, to identity.

Johnson highlights the importance of character when he writes that 'to shed light rather than shadow, we need to develop strong, ethical character … made up of positive traits or virtues (2013, p.78). He claims that 'good people … make good moral choices' (p.78). Nonetheless he suggests that the connection between character and leadership is not always clear-cut: in fact we should not be surprised to discover contradictions in a leader's character. History is not short of examples of revered leaders with flawed characters and 'private lapses don't always lead to lapses in public judgment' (p.89). On the other hand, 'it seems artificial to compartmentalize private and public ethics. Private tendencies can and do creep over into public decisions.'

Leaders can expect their character to be shaped over time (McNeal, 2006, p.6) and a crucible experience may highlight a character issue. For example, the crucible of multiple surgeries and the resultant time off work helped Shirley to realise her tendency to be a control freak. Another leader described the pain of being subjected to untrue allegations. While his church congregation trusted him and rallied to support him, he said that 'it was a horrible time … an awful time for both [my wife] and I'. The difficulty

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[89] Wright and Goodstein observe that it is 'a challenge that has perplexed several generations of social science and organizational scholars' (2007, p.930).

led him to recall a friend's warning: 'You have a great personality[90] but one day it might let you down'. It was in the crucible of crisis that this lesson was reinforced.

Once the crucible has highlighted an issue, it is important that leaders respond in an appropriate way if their character is to be shaped. Chapter 5 described Brian's leadership challenge crucible. Reflecting on this, Brian said:

> You know, was there something about me that in some way was responsible or was it, you know, it made me really think through my own testimony, my own character.

As described in chapter 5, the crisis led to the assurance of a clear sense of call. However, his comment here demonstrates an instinct towards self-examination and a desire to pay attention to any flaws that a crucible might reveal. Whether or not Brian was at fault, he was able to view the situation as an opportunity to rely more consciously on God and have the right attitude to another person.

> In the end, I suppose I learned to live with it. I learned to trust God to give me the grace, not only to deal with it, but to try to love this person.

Vic described a crisis in his family life which happened at the same time as his ministry in church was prospering. At home, his wife was deeply unhappy. It was a comment from his boss that began the process of change and he would eventually take up a leadership post in a smaller, more obscure setting. This is how he described his insight:

> God had given me … quite extraordinary gifts … as a preacher, as a minister, as a person who could relate to people … and, you know, comedian, and the whole works. A package. I had these gifts, but not the maturity … I had not the spiritual maturity, I didn't even think, now looking back, I had even the social, personal maturity, even though that was not the impression that was being created. And therefore wilderness was necessary for me.

There are three aspects of this experience that merit further reflection.

First, this is a reflection on an experience that took place some three decades previously and, in terms of hermeneutic phenomenology, is an example of a participant 'making

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[90] Although there is a difference between character and personality, this incident still makes the point in discussion.

sense' of his experience: his juxtaposition of his giftedness with his lack of maturity is a succinct diagnosis of his issue.

Second, the example illustrates the possibility that a leader's character may be tested in a crucible of success, and not only in a crucible of difficulty. This idea will be further explored in the theological reflection section later in the chapter.

Third, Vic's interpretation of his experience includes the suggestion that his neglect of family had come about as a result of his strong sense of call.

> Ministers, especially those in the Reformed tradition, who have this sense of call, are so driven, everything else just falls … secondary. Because everything has to be on the basis of what God has called you to do … There is something wrong here.

Arguably, discussion of this belongs in the later section of this chapter on calling. However Vic's crisis occurred at the intersection between calling and character and it demonstrates a fine line that leaders must walk. While a clear sense of calling is part of a leader's authenticity (George, 2003, p.19),[91] and thus contributes to strength of character, Vic's example is evidence that a clear sense of call may also undermine the leader's authenticity if it contributes to, or even masks neglect of another part of a leader's responsibility.

The point is similar to that described by Graham in his 'sawdust' experience and the realisation that he was neglecting his family, living effectively as a bachelor. The intense experience of brokenness that constituted his crucible led to a turning point and the realisation that 'actually part of being a Christian and part of being a leader is loving your wife, loving your family and giving them the attention that they need.'

Both of these examples demonstrate that a leader can be so enthralled with the task of leadership that other priorities, in this case family, are neglected. In both cases the realisation of what was happening was painful, as any such realisation would be expected to be.

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[91] George talks about 'understanding your purpose'.

Shirley described 'a huge crucible experience' during which she was the subject of manipulation and character assassination.[92] The experience had gone to the heart of her integrity. Six months later a mentor challenged her about her attitude towards the person who had wronged her. When she admitted that she hated him, her mentor challenged her about forgiveness:

> He didn't massage my ego or pain or anything, he just said you have to forgive him. There is no way out … Slowly God began to reveal to me how to forgive. And it culminated 6 months later … God did a transformative work in me that allowed me to forgive him in a way that was really almost nothing to do with me.

As the extract shows, the intervention of an honest mentor was essential in navigating this experience: while Shirley attributes the change to God's 'transformative work', it is not clear how that would have happened apart from the willingness of her mentor to confront her and Shirley's corresponding willingness to be confronted at a time when her ego may have preferred to be 'massaged'. The crucible, properly managed, led to transformation.

Crucible experiences may highlight issues of character; however they are likely to make a positive contribution to the development of the leader's character only if the leader responds in an appropriate way and is able to summon the necessary resilience

6.2.1.2 Resilience

Attention has already been drawn (in chapter 2) to the importance of the theme of resilience in discussions of Christian ministry and leadership. The fact that the majority of the leaders in the research had many years of experience, including experience of difficult challenges, is testimony to the resilience that became evident as part of their character.

Evidence from the interviews suggests several factors that contribute to a leader's resilience. These include a sense of calling (as seen in the section above) and a strong conviction with regard to one's leadership values. In Simon's case, it was his conviction

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[92] The person responsible was eventually convicted of a serious offence and spent time in prison.

that he 'couldn't hand the church over to [his opponents]' that kept him going despite opposition. Similarly, it was clarity of conviction that helped Stuart to persevere through his Orange Order crisis: 'It was a gospel issue from beginning to end.'

> I am convinced … I was right and am right to this day, that that has been central to the problems of … our province, this confusion of religion and politics….

A further factor is the leader's relationship with God (Chandler, 2009), not least the discovery of his love and a growing ability to trust him. These themes will be discussed in the following section (p.115ff.).

6.2.1.3 Spirituality

Spirituality itself is a slippery term with a proliferation of definitions (Bregman, 2004) and the study of its relationship with leadership is a developing field (Dent et al., 2005). In a discussion of spirituality and leadership, Marshall (2015) draws from his Quaker background which understands the starting point of spirituality as 'a personal, interior phenomenon in which the Divine is experienced and known inwardly' (p.6).

The term is not meant to be understood in any technical sense here, but is used rather as a catch-all term to describe aspects of a leader's relationship with God and, as such, it is an important component of who the leader is.

In Tim's case, the sudden, tragic loss of his girlfriend forced him into a close relationship with God and to a radical re-examination of his faith.

> God, you're all I've got. If you don't come through for me here, then nothing's going to work … I almost view that … that in that, in the aftermath of that that I disassembled my faith and put it back together again, because I needed to know, if this works now, it works for anything. And for me it did work. For me it did. It made sense … Yes I do believe it, there are no other answers, and I build on this.

Similarly, Steve reflected on his difficult overseas experience:

> But also there's a much deeper, you know seeing God work, seeing how he has worked in my own life, met me, grown me, you know a huge amount I think of growth and depth took place in those six years. You know as hard as it may have been, it was invaluable. I wouldn't trade it for the world. Not only the positive aspect of the

> experience, but even the hardness. I think it was extremely valuable. And I think the fruit of that is still being seen in our ministry.

These examples illustrate how the harshness of experience can cause a leader to cultivate a deeper relationship with God, or be aware of God working in a significant way.

In more detail, I suggest that crucible experiences appeared to relate to the leader's spirituality in four main ways which are explored below.

6.2.1.2.1 A deeper awareness of God's character

As chapter 5 noted, Frank described some hardship experiences encountered while working overseas: these experiences resulted in him having a deeper grasp of aspects of his theology.

> You know I come from a fairly, I come from pretty strong Reformed background with a high view of the sovereignty of God and … and a strong sense of the fallenness of the world, so that … the notion that bad things happen to good people isn't one I struggle with. I think over the years I've sort of thought it through a bit more and see the redemptive nature of the gospel as … God's action to fix things and to bring, to make things right eschatologically, not in, not in time, is really important … and as his work being, you know in time to draw us closer to him, to make us more holy, rather than to give us an easy ride: and they are things that I've always thought, you know … known intellectually but I think I've … grasped them on a deeper level as a result of these things.

Frank's theology has not changed in any formal, intellectual way; instead, doctrinal concepts to which he already subscribed were grasped 'on a deeper level'. In Simon's terms (see later section), they gained an 'existential intensity'.

Similarly, it was after navigating a 'theological dark night of the soul' that Vic came to see God in a new way, as described in chapter 5.

> For me this was a move from my theological adolescence, where my theology and my ability to articulate my theology was the most important thing, [to] where to see him as more wonderful than anything I could ever say … it is just so liberating.

There is no guarantee of an immediate, positive outcome, particularly when the crucible experience is harsh. As mentioned in chapter 5, Simon described his state of exhaustion and discouragement in the aftermath of his resignation from the church he had been leading. The circumstances of his life ('my life looks like Berlin in 1945') led him to question God's love.

Simon's initial interpretation of what had happened to him was highly negative ('maybe God doesn't love me') and was significantly influenced by his exhaustion and discouragement, but he came to reject this interpretation.[93]

> I mean it didn't take too long to figure out God really does love me. I still don't have answers for all this stuff, but I know that God loves me.

How Simon regained his understanding of God's love leads us to the next section.

6.2.1.2.2 Experiencing God's love

Discovering a personal sense of God's love appeared to be a feature of several of the leadership journeys.

To resume Simon's story:

> I'm a huge believer in the patience of God … I'm very thankful for the patience of God. Very gently, very gently and patiently, he put up with my hand-wringing and anguish and so forth and just said 'OK … let's get this guy a promotion but we're going to do it slowly so that he doesn't implode.' And I think that's what happened.[94]

When asked how he had rediscovered God's love, he highlighted his own Bible reading and the input of other people:

> I don't know. Except, many nights I couldn't sleep; I would wake up at 3 o'clock in the morning, let's say, unable to, exhausted but I couldn't sleep. I would just get up, make coffee, read the Bible and pray – cry out to God. The Psalms were very important. I

[93] A reminder that an individual's interpretation of an experience can be as important as the experience itself: there is no guarantee that the interpretation is correct!

[94] Obviously this, too, is Simon's interpretation.

> don't know what to say except somehow God just spoke to my innermost being and said, you know, I'm here, and I have a purpose for you.

Mention of the importance of the book of Psalms merits comment. As Estes suggests, 'this compilation of 150 songs reveals how the people of Israel turned to Yahweh in the full range of their life experiences' (2005, p.141). Subsequently believers have found the Psalms a valuable resource in relating to God (Brueggemann, 1984, p.15). Referring to Calvin's imagery, Longman describes the function of the Psalms as a reflection of the reader's inner life: 'when one reads a psalm like a mirror, identifying with the psalmist, then one discovers how one is doing on the inside' (2014, p.loc.681).

Additionally, community was important in Simon's restoration.

> The experience of healthy community has been huge. I have found often the experience of the love of God within the body of Christ.

Simon's rediscovery of God's love became part of the means of recovering from his crucible, a significant factor in his ability to 'bounce back' (Avolio & Luthans, 2006, p.155) from adversity, evidence of the importance of both spirituality and community in building resilience. A further outcome of Simon's crucible story – perhaps the most significant one – will be discussed in a later section of this chapter.

Steve described a 'life-changing' experience in which he became more aware of the love of God. The context was the 'emotional tailspin' leadership crisis described in chapter 5. Steve had subsequently been deeply challenged by the speaker at a conference.

> It was kind of like a tipping point but it also led me to ask … OK why is it that I cannot freely put myself into the Father's hands for him to do whatever he wants to … What is the issue? And so the next morning I heard … more of the same kind of thing.
>
> In a sense I had it out with God and just got down on my knees and said, what is going on here, I don't know why I revolted so strongly. What's going on? And that's where … it was so clear, he says, you just don't believe that I love you. That was it. And that in itself became so utterly devastating because I thought that's in my ministry, in my preaching, that's what I'd been preaching for years. But I'd had no clue what it meant functionally for me. That was the beginning of the awakening to the love of God and the work of Christ … dealing with all the failure … all of that has already been accomplished, and it opened the door into a freedom and joy that I had never known.

He went on to describe what had happened as 'life-changing':

> It was just the realisation of God coming and meeting me and communicating to me that I was valued because of the finished work of Christ. I was loved. It had nothing to do with my performance … to say that was life-changing is an understatement.

Chapter 5 also described Steve's reaction to the painful crucible that engulfed his family when his son-in-law was imprisoned. He described that he was 'deeply angry at God'. However, his initial anger eventually gave way to a renewed acceptance of his love when a visiting preacher preached on the love of the Father. Not only did he rediscover his conviction that God loved him, but the renewed assurance helped him to resolve a relationship breakdown.

> And I just melted ... During that month we were having a lot of missions, world mission speakers at the church, so I wasn't preaching, so I took about three days and just went off on a prayer retreat and just wrestled with God … through this whole thing.
>
> And, and again, settled into accepting that, no he really does love me, you know that's been one of the constant themes through my life. He really does love me and this is part of that and I can trust him. And I remember even coming home and one of the first things I did was that … I came downstairs to where my daughter was and just repented to her for, basically with her being the target of a lot of my anger.

For both Simon and Steve their renewed sense of God's love was discovered in the middle of harsh crucible experiences.

Stuart also described a 'life-changing' experience of the love of God. It happened at a charismatic conference that he attended during a difficult time in his ministry. It was not a harsh crucible like those described by Simon and Steve: however it was both intense and transformational (Bennis & Thomas, 2002, p.14).

> I was expecting great things to happen to me, but it wasn't happening to me. And the last evening this wee woman … she came and prayed with me. And you had to stand when you were being prayed with … she … reached up … and prayed that the Holy Spirit would come on me. And boy did he ever! He came and I was out of circulation for about 45 minutes.

> During that 45 minutes I had the most wonderful meeting with God, as if God was sitting there and I was here and he was dealing with the past… I never saw his face, because there was a distance between us, I knew that God was there, I knew where I was, I knew I was on the floor … he dealt with things that severely troubled me.

He recalled hearing an audible voice.

> The one thing that he did reassure me, more than anything else, was that he loved me, he loved me … It was just a total assurance of his love. If ever there was a life-changing thing that was it.

On Stuart's own admission, it is possible that others would discount his experience. Nonetheless he regards it as 'a phenomenal experience of the Spirit of God', and it took on great significance for him. A later section in this chapter will reflect on the inevitable questions of validity that this kind of experience raises.

Ian also recounted an unusual, and transformative experience that related to his understanding of God's love. It happened during a visit to the Airport Church in Toronto, which, at the time was the focal point for some unusual phenomena experienced by those attending.[95] Ian's experience did not actually occur during the organised events at the church, but came during a visit to the Niagara Falls.

> It was as though the windows of heaven opened or something; and this became for me the mercy of God. It's as though the Lord was saying to me – 'Look there is more mercy than you will ever need.' It just keeps coming and coming and coming, you know?
>
> I felt soaked[96] in the mercy of God … [It was] a really, really important engagement with God in my life. I think my ministry changed … it was as though the Lord re-energised my ministry at that particular point.

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[95] Among these was uncontrolled laughter. The 'Toronto Blessing' has divided opinion among Christian leaders. I will return to this in a later section.

[96] It is not clear how intentionally he used this word, but 'soaking' is an experience referred to in the context of the Toronto movement.

This is another example of an experience that was not at all harsh, but nonetheless was both dramatic and transformational, resulting in a renewed confidence in the love and mercy of God.

As with Stuart's apparently audible voice of God, Ian's interpretation of his experience could doubtless be challenged. Many people have visited the Niagara Falls without interpreting the phenomenon as a parable of the love of God. Ian's interpretation of what he saw as a message from God may have had more to do with his inner predisposition. Some people may be quicker to interpret various events as 'God speaking' than others; conversely there may be others who miss out on things God may be saying to them.

A similar caution could be offered in relation to Vic's experience in the aftermath of serious surgery (already referred to in chapter 5).

> You know that expression Paul uses about the love of God being poured into your heart by the Holy Spirit? Well, this was the time this happened to me. I felt so loved, so completely enveloped with his love and his presence that all fear was cast away…

A later section in the chapter will return to the issue of subjective experience, but at this stage it should be noted that common to all of these experiences was an awareness of God's love. For some, but not all, the experiences were painful. For several, they were life-changing.

6.2.1.2.3 Learning to trust God

Steve's experience also alluded to the issue of trust. Other leaders also talked about learning to trust God or depend more consciously on him.

The theme of trust was a significant element in Brian's story: his strong sense of independence has been replaced by a greater degree of trust in God. The theme features strongly in the following extracts:

> I've got to the point of realising I am thankful for all those difficulties in my Christian walk, 'cos all of those have been the means whereby God has caused me to let go of my independence and control of my life and I've had to say, Lord, you know about this.

> The first 5 years [of our marriage] were a crucible experience as to … having to deal with situations outside of your control and trust a loving God in those, and I believe

> and both of us believe that that experience prepared us for ministry. And therefore prepared me for other crucible experiences.
>
> These difficulties, the more personal ones have been the means of allowing me to say, well Lord I don't understand but I trust you to work it out. Help me to be right with you and right with people, even though they're not right with me.
>
> For me, trusting God, as I said Proverbs 3:5-6 is a key verse for us. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not unto your own understanding. That's the key words there for me. Lean not unto your understanding. But in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths. That, for us, is absolutely a key piece of Scripture.

The difficult circumstances beyond Brian's control have helped him develop his trust in God.

Shirley also talked about trusting God, although she distinguished between *learning* to trust God and finding that an ability to trust God has been *inculcated* in her.

> God has inculcated into me something that is a gift of him and that is a capacity to know that he will not fail me and that I can trust him.

This was deeper than learning and had come about through the experience of the 'dark place' of her illness.

> I realise the only reason I can do what I do today is because God allowed me to go to the darkest place and in that darkest place revealed himself to me. And only in that dark place was he able to do a work in me that's allowing me to now be effective.

By definition a Christian leader has faith in God. However it is experiences beyond a leader's control that force the leader to a greater degree of trust. Shirley's comment suggests that it may be in the most difficult crucibles that a sense of trust is most deeply instilled.

I return to Ruth's observation (chapter 5) on the difficulty of family-related crucibles.

> In terms of difficulties in leadership, that was – I remember one time saying to [my husband] … 'I just can't do this anymore' … And it was family stuff, it wasn't church stuff. So for me, the hard thing in leadership is all around the issue of relationship.

> You know, those are the moments when you grow as a person and develop as well and you know moments when I felt God came and met with me and challenged me too, you know, even in terms of … in helping other people to see, it's not always your problems that define you … and that we can become so easily defined by the problems that we're facing.

This was an important insight. But beyond not allowing herself to be defined by her problems, Ruth learned more about relying on God.

> It's nothing more complicated than … it's in those hard times that … you do press in to God, in your crying out to him for help; and in that context – I suppose it's a wee bit like David … (at Ziklag) … they wept until they had no more tears to weep – I really identify with that passage, 'cos you think, you know David, then you still turned it around and went to the enemy's camp and took back what the enemy had stolen. But there's a significant verse in that passage that says David strengthened himself in the Lord his God. That's probably one of the greatest things that you need to learn on leadership too is the ability to strengthen yourself in God.[97]

Not only was her relationship with God ultimately deepened because of the crucible experience: it was arguably the strength of that relationship that enabled her to navigate a particularly painful crucible and extract an important leadership lesson.

6.2.1.2.4 Ongoing discipleship

A fourth aspect of a leader's spirituality is the realisation that a leader remains a follower (Boers, 2015). Graham had described a season of questioning in relation to the purpose and significance of his work. Two factors had forced these questions to the surface. One was a season of discouragement at the dispiriting state of some of the small rural churches under his supervision: 'there are four people there, and two out of the four are your wife and yourself.' The other, conversely, was being part of large, full churches where,

[97] Chapter 2 referred to Chandler's view that 'pastors, by virtue of their calling, need to nurture an ongoing and renewing relationship with God to maintain life balance, reduce stress, and avoid burnout' (2009, p.284).

> People are singing all these songs, and these words of surrender and self-sacrifice are flowing from our lips. And again I've thought to myself, what is this all about? Are our lives really matching what we are singing here? Like, this is radical what we're singing but are we as radical in our living and as radical in our lifestyle and all of this?

Together, these extremes formed a kind of crucible which led him to ask an 'essential question' (see Bennis & Thomas, 2002, p.99) about what was going on. The question related not only to the Church but also, even more fundamentally, to what it really means to be a Christian. The reflection took him back to the gospels, Christ's call to 'follow me', and to a self-evident, but perhaps easily-overlooked observation on Christian leadership.

> Even though, as leaders, God has called us to be shepherds, I think one of the big mistakes some of us make as leaders is – we actually have forgotten we are still sheep.

Leaders never graduate from being followers and shepherds never cease to be sheep.

His relationship with God was further informed by an experience at a 'prayer mountain' in Uganda.

> I had time with God that I rarely had back home … and totally unexpectedly it became for me one of those times that has become a special time.
>
> And the passage of Scripture that impacted me so profoundly and actually clarified in a way part of what God's call on my life was, was Isaiah 50:4 which says, 'The Sovereign Lord has given me an instructed tongue; he has given me a word to sustain the weary; he wakens me morning by morning.' And, honestly, Alan, it was just, I mean if Jesus himself had appeared and said those words to me, in person, it couldn't have been clearer ... And I have found that that is what God does with me. Very often my sermons come, or ideas for sermons come really early in the morning.

It could be argued that reading and applying an extract from Scripture hardly requires a special occasion in an unusual setting. However, Graham's experience was that the occasion was quite unique and this, along with a degree of fear given the remoteness and solitude of the setting, may have meant that Graham was in a more impressionable state of mind. Whether or not 'crucible' is too strong a word to use on this occasion this clearly was a memorable defining moment for Graham.

Finally, the cumulative effect of years of crucible experiences can shape a leader's expectations of what it means to follow God.

> It's so hard to describe the changes in yourself. I think I … have learnt that – Jesus said in this world you will have trouble … but I have overcome the world – and I think I've changed in that my expectation for a trouble-free life has certainly gone out the window, I think I had … in those early days of disappointments I got very frustrated at God, thinking he owed me something, I think that has changed dramatically; I think I have settled in a place … that blessing does not preclude difficulty, in that Mary, you know – blessed are you amongst women – but she was probably in the most difficult period of her life … And I think I've changed in that too – I feel like I can sit in a place and say, 'I am blessed,' without expecting that that will mean that life is trouble-free. That brings … an amount of peace, I think (Ruth).

While the experiences described differed in terms of their intensity or their harshness, crucible experiences appeared to function in the lives of leaders by enriching or deepening their experience of and relationship with God. While some of the lessons learned may be basic articles of faith that would comfortably be affirmed by any Christian, these experiences have allowed the leader to *experience* their beliefs with a degree of 'existential intensity'.

6.2.2 What the leader does: leadership calling

The second broad category to classify the significance of crucible experiences is their relation to the leader's calling.

6.2.2.1 Calling

The term 'calling' has come to be applied to both religious and non-religious settings (Haney-Loehlein et al., 2015).[98] In terms of religious calling, Guinness (2003, p.4) proposes that

[98] Haney-Loehlein et al. observe the link between a higher sense of calling and increased life and work satisfaction as well as the ability to endure stress and conflict.

> calling is the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion and dynamism lived out as a response to his summons and service.

In contrast with those who might wish to limit the call to what he describes as 'the fallacy of the contemporary Protestant term *full-time Christian service*' Guinness argues that the call in fact implicates 'everyone, everywhere, and in everything' (2003, p.30).

He distinguishes between an original 'ordinary' calling (p.49) and a later 'special' calling. The latter 'refers to those tasks and missions laid on individuals through a direct, specific, supernatural communication from God'. It contrasts with a more 'ordinary' sense of life purpose in response to God's call to follow him, a calling whose implications are to be lived out even if there is no direct, even supernatural, communication from God about a special calling. He argues that 'in this sense no follower of Christ is without a calling, for we all have an original calling even if we do not all have a later, special calling'. Some people have both.

All of the leaders made reference to a sense of this special calling, or the way they believe they have been 'led' into specific leadership situations. Crucible experiences were associated with the leader's sense of calling in three principal ways that will be explored in this section.

6.2.2.1.1 The call itself as crucible

For some leaders the experience of the call itself constituted a crucible, leading to new territory. Chapter 5 has already observed that some conversion experiences effectively contain the seeds of a call to ministry. At other times an experience of calling seems to be a later, unconnected event.

> The first time that I remember really, seriously being impacted about what it meant to respond to the call of God was when Eddie Totten challenged us at a Ballycastle weekend … He was the guy that really … impacted me to think about this is the direction I want to give my life to this. And my sense of calling to Christian ministry – a term that I hate – but you know what I mean … goes back to then (Tim).

Noel recalled a conference in Germany. When the speaker announced a commissioning service and invited people to be prayed for, Noel and his friends believed that God was

calling them to work in Ireland. They went forward for prayer and the speaker laid hands on them: 'And we stood at the back of a hall in Germany, cried our eyes out.'

For Ruth, the occasion was Spring Harvest:

> For the first time in our lives, [my husband] and I responded in a meeting … and it was a call to leadership: 'Are you prepared, you know, to serve God in this way?'

Each of these experiences was a relatively dramatic moment for the leaders.

A further aspect of the crucible for some was the element of struggle. Graham had three post-university options, one of which was to enter ordained ministry. The advice of friends, coupled with what he was sensing from his reading of the Bible brought him to a point 'I knew I had to do something' and he offered himself for the ordination process. But there was a struggle.

> Yes, I would say it was an internal fight … I tell you what for me I think the major thing was, was feelings of inadequacy … On the other hand there was this irresistible sense of call … I suppose summarised … in Paul's words, you know - woe unto me if I don't preach the gospel … I just knew beyond a shadow of doubt - I have to do this, you know this is God's call … I guess it was a crucible in the sense of, if you wanted to make money in life, you didn't choose ordained ministry.

Part of the struggle was due to the financial implications of choosing a career in church ministry, not least since Graham had the guarantee of inheriting the auctioneering business of an elderly man who had no family.

> So that was a huge thing: but actually, working that through was another confirmation of I knew I just had to respond to God's call on my life.
>
> I just worked it through, I guess, as a disciple, you know, what is Christ's call? It is to follow him. What does following him mean for me? And I knew that if I started moving in the direction of becoming an auctioneer, the peace of Christ did not rule in my heart and I knew that wasn't in line with what people were telling me my giftings were.

Each of these experiences in some way involved reaching a point of decision when the leader was compelled to respond to some kind of inner urging.

It is worth noting that not every leader had a dramatic, crucible-like call experience: Simon described his call as being more of a 'gentle awakening', as though something simply dawned on him.

6.2.2.1.2 The testing of the call

Chapter 5 described how Brian had accepted a pastoral appointment without having a clear confirmation from God.[99] It was only during a stress-related leave of absence that he finally became convinced that God wanted him to be there. The crucible of opposition and stress forced him to examine a decision that had been made for circumstantial reasons and emerge with a clear sense of call. Apparently his decision had been the correct one: what had been missing was a sense of assurance.

Shirley has found that her sense of call has often been tested. She recalled a conversation with her supervisor during her first experience of vocational leadership.

> I remember saying to her very clearly … that I felt so hugely called to this, I had such a clear sense of call and she looked at me and she said, 'Well that will be tested many times.'
>
> I often look back and I thank God for every ministry opportunity that I've had, that it has been preceded by a very clear sense of call … and every one of those then was immediately tested.
>
> What amazes me … every time there was a test I was surprised; and yet it shouldn't have been a surprise 'cos it had happened every other time. I was always surprised … so I suppose it didn't make the testing any easier … But what I can see is that the testing formed me in such a way that it has allowed me each time to be a much better vehicle for God's work.

One example was her appointment to an important denominational youth work role. When the preferred candidate turned it down, Shirley, who came second in the interview process, was made to wait for the completion of another application process.

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[99] The means of discerning the call will be discussed further in the theological reflection section of this chapter.

> The utter clarity of call … and the way that my call to that was tested was that I applied for it and wasn't given it the first time round … within a day of having been offered it [the young minister who had been offered it] withdrew and said this is not God's call on my life.

After a month, during which time new candidates were able to apply and people had predicted that she would be unsuccessful, a sense of calling began to crystallise.

> But it was during that time … that I began to say to the Lord, 'Why's this annoying me? I don't even know if I want this job … this is so out of the blue.' And so it became … a place of forming a vision in me, and that was the time when the guy in Larne[100] came back to me about making the church a relevant place.

It was during the waiting period that this recollection came back to her and she began to think, 'goodness, you maybe do want me in this job, Lord'. Yet the more she began to think that God wanted her in the job, the more she had opposition.

> So that was where the test of call came there.

The testing resulted in a stronger conviction about what she had been called to do.

More recently, during an extended period of illness that had resulted in the suspension of her plans for a new ministry, Shirley wondered how what she believed to be a God-given vision could be realised. She explained her agitation to members of a monastic community who told her that she was 'heavily pregnant with something that is of God but it's not yet time for it to be born'.

> And that brought a great sense of, OK, God has stuff to do in the waiting that cannot be done anywhere else.

It is often the delayed fulfilment of the call that constitutes the test:[101] not only does the delay allow the leader time to assess the solidity of their call, but, as Shirley's story

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[100] Some years previously when she was working as a teacher, a pupil who had been beaten by his father challenged her by asking 'what good's your church and your God to me?' She recalled: 'And in that moment God … *put an arrow in my heart* about the church becoming a relevant place for all young people … I stood there and in my mind I thought, 'You are right;' I said, 'My God is of plenty of use to you but my church is useless' (emphasis mine).

[101] See Hab. 2:3.

demonstrates, more may be happening during the delay. Specifically, Shirley mentioned how a delay helped shape her. Her sense of calling took on additional weight as her vision was allowed to mature. It is also significant to note that the outcome of her call being tested proved to be part of her own shaping for the role. The imagery of pregnancy that was suggested to her is appropriate!

6.2.2.1.3 Calling equips a leader to survive a crucible

Not only does the crucible test or confirm the leader's sense of call, but it may be a strong sense of call that enables a leader to survive a crucible.[102]

> There's a real sense … in which when I ever go through difficult times, the Lord has nearly always provided me with such a dramatic call to a particular role that I think … you can't gainsay that, that actually happened (Ian).

> In the early days I could not have stuck that job if I had not been absolutely rock solid about the call. Because I had incredible opposition from some of the young ministers who didn't want me there[103] (Shirley).

These accounts raise several questions in relation to an understanding of calling. What are we to make of the subjective nature of these experiences? By extension, is the call something that is experienced purely personally, or should we expect a role for the community in helping to discern it and perhaps add an element of objectivity? Perhaps more pertinent to the issue of crucible experiences is the extent to which the call is a gradual awakening to a sense of purpose and to what extent it can be traced to a dramatic, crisis event. Should one expect that a call will be dramatic, modelled on stories like those of Moses or Isaiah, or are there other models? I will return to some of these questions in the theological reflection that follows.

6.2.2.3 Leadership

This section of the chapter will explore the significance of crucible experiences in the leadership to which the leaders were called.

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[102] See Haney-Loehlein (2015, p.17).

[103] See the discussion of the gender crucible in chapter 5.

6.2.2.3.1 Learning about leadership

Learning to be a leader can in itself be a crucible experience. Chapter 5 discussed how some of the participants had been reluctant leaders, had found that they had been put in at 'the deep end', or that some of their leadership experiences constituted a 'baptism of fire'.

Brian had recalled the 'steep learning curve' of church leadership.

> Suddenly to find yourself heading up a church and realising you hadn't a baldy notion really … You know step out in faith, ask a few people the important questions, read a bit, and basically work it all out.

Ruth recalled how she and her husband 'were just kind of stumbling along, learning as we go'; Graham described how he had developed his leadership style by accumulation, through reading, through training courses and listening and 'to be honest … a little bit of common sense'. Simon also mentioned reading, while both he and Geoff have learned by observing other leaders.

Shirley's interview had referred often to leading in 'virgin territory', uncharted areas of leadership where she encountered many challenges.

> I had no mentor who knew how to help me, and I had to, to stick my neck out and take a risk. And sometimes – mostly it worked, and sometimes it didn't.

The experience of meeting a new challenge, for which he felt essentially unprepared, yet seeing resultant growth, taught Ian to be expectant in new situations.

> It inculcated into me a sense that things are possible and things can grow and I have to in some way adapt my leadership to a new situation each time, but actually isn't that great craic [sic].

However at times it was the crucible of failure, either the failures of others, or the leader's own failure, that gave opportunities for learning.

> Early on you learn a lot about what you should not do as a leader. Early on the biggest thing that I had to learn was leadership is not just giving people right information. If you want to see their lives changed it comes through loving them and you have to love them first before they're going to listen. And I did not do a good job of that.

> I did not know at all how to bring those changes about. I thought … as a young seminary graduate … you could just preach [to] them the truth and they would change. But the problem was they weren't changing and I got angry and that didn't help. So I've learned an awful lot about just the necessity of loving people (Steve).

The ability to learn and adapt may allow a leader to move beyond early failure. As Bennis and Thomas observe, 'with enough adaptive capacity, there are no failures, only growth' (2002, p.114).

Further, the painful loss experienced by Tim, as described in chapter 5, demonstrates how crucibles can become part of the equipping of a leader for a specific role: in Tim's case, learning to sit 'with people who were dealing with tragedy'.

6.2.2.3.2 The defining mark of the leader's leadership

The work of some leaders is marked by a particular theme or emphasis. While this may develop gradually over the course of a leadership journey, at times a crucible highlights the leader's conviction, forcing the leader to draw a defining line in the sand.

Tim described a time when he was forced to determine the core of his calling:

> And it really centred on what do we believe God has really put in my heart. And … we narrowed it down to two things: the first one was – it had to be an opportunity to help people engage with the Bible better; and the second one was – we knew I had developed a heart for what God was doing in the wider church … This has to be at the heart of whatever is my future ministry. This is how God has refined me, this is the sense of calling that he has put on me and … those two things have remained, that's the core of who I am.

Much of what was contained in these emphases came from the influence of other people, although it was during an 'unsettling time' when he and his wife had been forced to think through issues of calling that these themes crystallised for him.

Some leaders are visionaries whose leadership journey has been marked by light bulb or trigger moments where new ideas have been sparked. Chapter 5 referred to Ian's frequent 'Popeye moments': his leadership is motivated by the conviction that the Church could be healthier than it often is.

> Now I'm in leadership because I said that of the church that I grew up in … I would have gone along there and there was no sense of community, no sense of people coming to faith, no sense of anything other than religion, as it were, you know … I'm thinking to myself – I can't stand it, I can't stand it no more … I need to change that.

Shirley, too is a visionary who has normally led in uncharted territory. The section on calling referred to her experience of having an arrow in her heart about the church's relevance to young people. Her leadership role gave her the opportunity to do something about it. More recently her own experience of a spiritual retreat, allied to her observation of leaders who were 'falling off the pegs' due to their failure to nurture themselves sparked the idea of a new ministry organisation.

> That started to … develop as a passion within me. And I started to integrate a lot of the retreat-type stuff with the leadership teams that I was working with.

All of this raises the question of whether certain kinds of leaders are more likely to draw leadership-changing lessons from certain situations than others. Are visionary leaders more likely to experience such defining moments? Bennis and Thomas noted (2002, p.123) that being a 'first class noticer' was a component in the key leadership skill of adaptive capacity.[104]

To return more specifically to the part played by crucible experiences, Stuart's and Simon's leadership-defining moments were more dramatic and required both leaders to demonstrate a degree of hardiness as they dealt with serious challenges to their leadership.

Chapter 5 described Stuart's 'seminal' conflicts with the Orange Order, with his decision not to be involved in Orange services in the church, and the ensuing conflict. The crucible forced Stuart to define the core values of his call.

> It was absolutely central to my call, because at that time, you know, the old maxim of the UVF was still very much to the fore – for God and Ulster … it was a blasphemy to put Ulster on the same level as God, as far as your worship was concerned. That was anathema to me. That was something I felt strongly about and as far as my call was

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[104] Adaptive capacity was one of four leadership competencies and also included hardiness, proactively seizing opportunities, creativity and 'learning learning'.

> concerned, it was central to it. Wherever I would go after that, that would have to be, it would have to be central to the call, because, to me, the gospel was being compromised. It was a gospel issue, from beginning to end.
>
> I am convinced … I was right and am right to this day, that that has been central to the problems of … our province, this confusion of religion and politics, because, and it still is within my own denomination, you know?
>
> It certainly crystallised my beliefs, of what were important in my beliefs and really what a minister's role in a situation like this ought to be.
>
> I think no Christian courts conflict … most of us don't … But definitely in the ministry and in leadership there has to come a point where you can go and no further; you have to have a Luther approach … And the no further bit is way out far for me, but if you reach that point on any issue that endangers the gospel, then it's gonna stop.

This was a notable example of how a crucible came to define someone's leadership. The experience was harsh and called both for resilience and for Stuart to determine where he would draw a line in the sand.

A second example of a leadership-defining crucible came from Simon and the story of rejection described in chapter 5. As a result of his experience some of his convictions about how a church should function gained what he described as an 'existential intensity'. Simon had been significantly influenced by the work of Francis Schaeffer who had argued that the church should be a living proof of the gospel rather than merely bearing verbal witness to the gospel. Simon's formulation of this is that a church should be marked by a 'gospel culture' and not merely by gospel doctrine.

> These experiences in churches that were in some ways so attractive and gospel-centred at a doctrinal level, and yet I found myself completely confused and completely disillusioned by the human realities of it.
>
> If you have gospel doctrine on paper but you don't have gospel culture in relationships, you don't really have gospel doctrine.

Simon suggested that when people are treating one another badly, the problem is theological.

> The gospel hasn't landed on them yet. It's merely a flag to salute; it's merely a point of formal loyalty, not a transforming power within.

The crucible has 'hugely changed' Simon's approach to church leadership. His crucible experiences have profoundly shaped him and his leadership such that he views safeguarding a 'gospel culture' in his church as his primary leadership responsibility.

When asked if he could be the pastor he is today without his two experiences of rejection, his response was,

> Absolutely not. It was essential. In that sense - I never dreamed I would ever say this - in that sense I'm sometimes almost thankful.

Simon's 'existential intensity' with regard to his understanding of the gospel echoes Frank's deeper grasp of aspects of his reformed theology: it is the crucible that has given his conviction an added dimension.

Just as Stuart's forced line in the sand came to define the irreducible core of his leadership, so Simon's deeper sense of conviction has shaped his leadership in terms of the priorities of the church he now leads.

In concluding this section, the following comment by Pearce (in Shamir & Eilam, 2005, p.402) is pertinent:

> Your passion about what you want to change grows from the foundation of values that have been formed by your life experience. These values are vital to you personally, not because they are socially acceptable, although they might be—and certainly not because they look good on a plaque on the wall, but because you have actually experienced them to be true.

It is clear, not least from these experiences of Stuart and Simon, that while crucible experiences can yield 'gold' in terms of how leadership is shaped, such results come at a cost and call for a significant degree of resilience on the part of the leader.[105]

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[105] See the discussion on burnout and resilience in chapter 2 and note Forney's comment on 'the acutely adverse experiences encountered in living out the call' (2010, p.9).

6.3 Theological reflection

Insofar as crucible experiences are experiences of testing and transformation, the Bible is a rich source of pertinent narratives. Themes of calling, character and spirituality are significant. Many of the biblical leaders encountered dramatic crucible experiences that shaped both their lives and their leadership.

Among the many examples one might include Joseph, whose character and trust in God were severely tested in his betrayal, temptation, and prolonged stay in prison (Ps. 105:19); David who demonstrated his courage as a shepherd faced with a lion and a bear (1 Sam. 17:36) even before his confrontation with Goliath and long before his elevation to the throne of Israel; Nehemiah, the course of whose life was changed in the crucible of receiving news from the city of his ancestors (Neh. 1); or Saul/Paul whose life direction was altered with his Damascus Road experience (Acts 9) and his subsequent conviction that Jesus was Lord (Phil. 2:11). These all experienced life-changing or life-defining moments that were a key part of their paths to leadership.

Not that dramatic, life-changing experiences were the preserve of the major biblical characters we might commonly describe as leaders: indeed an examination of some of the unlikely people who found themselves influencing events in the providence of God might challenge some of the normally accepted understandings of the nature of leadership.

For example, Esther's agreeing to approach the king (Est. 4:16) changed the course of history of the Jewish people perhaps as much as Joseph's perseverance in prison: 'God's providential care had brought Esther to this point, but Esther accepted the challenge that might cost her life' (Breneman, 1993, p.338).

Akinyele explored Esther's leadership, noting that she stepped into leadership for a specific moment and suggesting that that it 'shows that it is possible to lead from an inherently powerless position and work effectively within an oppressive system without attempting to change the structure of the system' (2009, p.78). She wondered if more work could be done in exploring the application of Esther's model of leadership to oppressed people.

In the New Testament, Mary, the mother of Jesus, experienced several profound, life-changing moments, from the birth announcement (Lk. 1:26-33), to her role as a witness

of her son's crucifixion (Mt. 27:56). From the perspective of this project, the example of Mary may carry particular relevance for the wives of some of the leaders who were interviewed. While these women's stories were not specifically explored in detail, several of the leaders mentioned the crucibles that their behaviour had implied for their wives: like Mary, they are women whose souls were pierced by a sword (see Lk. 2:35)!

In addition there were the many people, some unnamed, whose encounters with Jesus during his ministry functioned as tests and a means to transformation.

Nor should one overlook the crucible experiences of Jesus himself. A later section of the chapter will refer to the record of the temptations at the beginning of his ministry, but the ultimate crucible experience must be that of his crucifixion[106] and the events leading up to it.

All three of the Synoptists devote space to the account of Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36-46; Mk. 14:32-42; Lk. 22:39-46). Dudry (1987, p.168) described Gethsemane as 'the final fork in [Jesus'] road', last in a series of choices to submit to his Father's will. Both Matthew and Mark draw particular attention to the strong emotions that Jesus experienced. In Matthew's terms (26:37), 'he began to be sorrowful and troubled (λυπεῖσθαι καὶ ἀδημονεῖν)', while Mark (14:33) describes him becoming 'greatly distressed and troubled (ἐκθαμβεῖσθαι καὶ ἀδημονεῖν).

The Gethsemane accounts have not been without their problems. For one thing, as Madigan (1995) has demonstrated, the portrayal of Christ's human weakness and passions posed a problem for ancient interpreters who saw Christ primarily as all-powerful and all-knowing. The portrayal of humanity that was difficult for them is part of what makes the Gethsemane episode appealing to modern readers.

In terms of exegesis, Blaising (1979) has argued that, rather than being a battle of wills, Christ's prayer was not a prayer to *avoid* the cup or the hour, but that the cup and the hour would pass and not consume him. Carson (1984, p.544) acknowledges the

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[106] A degree of caution is called for in observing the apparent link between the Latin *crux* and the English *crucible*. The etymological link seems to be less direct than direct in that a *crucibulum* (whence *crucible*) was a night-light that may have hung in front of a crucifix (see *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, p.231).

attractiveness of this alternative exegesis, but rejects it for both grammatical and theological reasons.

If we understand Gethsemane as a significant crucible experience, Lane's observation is pertinent: 'Gethsemane [was] the critical moment in Jesus' life when the full meaning of his submission to the Father confronted him with its immediacy' (1974, p.516).

A more complete exploration of a range of such biblical accounts is beyond the scope of this section of the thesis as the main focus will be on a selection of biblical accounts that relate specifically to the emerging themes of character and calling that have already been highlighted in this chapter.

6.3.1 Character and spirituality

The emphasis on character in Christian leadership literature is unsurprising, given its importance in the Christian tradition.

Banks and Ledbetter (p.loc.1029) underline 'the importance of leading from wholeness and from a clear sense of who one is in God': who the leader is will influence what the leader does.

Lawrence claims that character ('who you are when no one is looking') is one of the essential marks of a leader; it 'not only affects us in the private moments; it also seeps out into the public arena' (2004, p.124). Character is most clearly seen in small, day-to-day things, when the leader is under pressure, and when the leader is in private. Among other things, its importance is underlined in that 'without credibility … a leader will have no one to lead' (p.125) and insofar as it is character issues that most often lead to derailment.

According to Palmer (2000, p.78) a leader has the ability to project either light or shadow: he or she 'shapes the ethos in which others must live'. He argues that we need to pay attention to this shadow side of a leader, which calls for a degree of introspection, something that does not always sit easily with leaders who are prone to extroversion. Yet, 'if we do not understand that the enemy is within, we will find a thousand ways of making someone "out there" into the enemy, becoming leaders who oppress rather than liberate others' (Palmer, 2000, p.80).

6.3.1.1 Biblical expectations of character

Wright and Goodstein suggest that much of the Old Testament account of the ancient Hebrews could be viewed as 'a story of character and character formation' (2007, p.935). Underlining the essentially moral nature of character, Guinness observes that 'Righteousness is a matter of the heart … who we are at the core of our beings – before God' (1999, p.13). [107] Not only is character cultivated before God, but it also has to be cultivated with his help.

Both Old and New Testament writers exhort the people of God as a whole to be obedient and 'holy' (Lev.11:44). Special attention was given to the kings of Israel with Deuteronomy's warning of the need to guard against temptation (Deut. 17:16-17). As McConville observes, constraints were placed in three spheres (military, political, and economic) which were normally regarded as measures of success (2002, p.294): the king was to guard himself against these specific temptations by means of his knowledge and study of the Law (Von Rad, 1996, p.120).

The emphasis on character continues in the New Testament, whether in the general application in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7), in Saint Paul's list of the qualities of a person who is being 'led by the Spirit' (Gal. 5:22-23), or in specific qualities relating to leaders (1 Tim. 3:1-12). Of particular relevance are the Pastoral Epistles' lists of qualifications for elders and overseers. Whatever the passages may tell us about the evolving structures of the early church, it is worth noting that 'we do not have much of a job description; rather the focus is on a character description' (Witherington, 2006, p.109).

6.3.1.2 Flawed character

Both biblical and empirical evidence support Johnson's (2013) view that we should not be surprised at contradictions in leaders' character. Many of the Old Testament kings are condemned in fairly comprehensive terms for their poor character as noted in the refrain: 'he did what was evil in the sight of the Lord'. Interestingly, the first occurrence

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[107] He contrasts the Hebrew view with the Greek view that saw character as a community concern, and not just an individual concern (Guinness, 1999, p.13).

of this phrase in reference to a king is in relation to Solomon (1 Kings 11:6) who proved to be in clear breach of the requirements of Deuteronomy 17. Ironically, as McConville (2002, p.294) observes, 'no Israelite king was more successful than Solomon' – at least when measured by what otherwise would have been regarded as marks of success! Apparently good and wise leaders can be flawed.

Similarly, a reader of the sordid account of King David's adultery and the murder of Uriah (2 Sam. 12) may wonder how he could have been a man 'after God's heart'![108] Hezekiah had been an essentially good king until the demonstration of his pride and his welcome of Babylonian envoys to whom he showed his treasure house. Whatever political and military motivations he may have had in welcoming the Babylonians (2 Kings 20),[109] the author of Chronicles highlights his pride: in Dillard's words (1987, p.260), 'Hezekiah … failed God's test'.

Bill George's observation that 'during the course of their leadership journeys many leaders … get derailed' is pertinent. These leaders are not necessarily bad leaders, but that they get caught up in their own success. 'Just as they are receiving more acclaim from the external world and the rewards that go with it, they are at greatest risk of deviating from their True North' (2007, p.27).

The theme of flawed leadership and the close coexistence of success and failure were mentioned in relation to Vic's interview in which he described his wife's anger towards God, as she struggled to understand the juxtaposition of successful ministry with neglect of his family. In his case, public success was both masking and contributing to a rapidly unravelling personal situation that had the potential to derail Vic's leadership in its early stages.

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[108] McCarter (1980, p.229) suggests that the Hebrew expression (1 Sam. 13:14) be better translated 'a man of [God's] choosing'. Firth (2009, p.156) agrees that 'the emphasis is more on the freedom of Yahweh's choice than on David's character'. On the other hand, George (2002) prefers to focus on David himself, seeking to demonstrate that the nature of his heart is seen in his relationship to and trust of God.

[109] See Hens-Piazza (2006, p.372).

6.3.1.3 The testing of character

Guinness (1999, p.13) states that 'the nature of … consistent core character is usually either formed best or revealed most clearly in the crucible of testing'. One is reminded of Badaracco's observation that defining moments consist in revealing, testing and shaping (1997, p.57).

Biblically, an experience of adversity may serve to demonstrate otherwise hidden elements of character. Moses explained the difficulties of Israel's forty years of desert wandering as a test (Deut. 8:2-3). The wilderness removed the people's favoured props and 'undermined the shallow bases of confidence of those who were not truly rooted and grounded in God' (Craigie, 1976, p.185).

Deuteronomy's reference to manna (8:3) throws light on the narrative of Exodus 16, where manna is God's solution to Israel's complaint of hunger. The lesson to be learned is that 'humanity is more than material and finds its true sustenance in the moral and spiritual realm through obedient relationship to YHWH': an important, ongoing lesson (Moberly, 2007, p.224). Such a relationship called for people to trust God as an expression of 'faithfulness that goes deeper than obedience in particular instances' (McConville, 2002, p.169). Tests of both scarcity and blessing were part of God's guiding the people towards maturity (Von Rad, 1996, p.71).

While the Deuteronomy reference relates specifically to a nation rather than to an individual, much less an individual leader, the underlying principle remains relevant in that God so orchestrated the circumstances of the people as to test them and discover what was in their heart: in Guinness' terms, what was at the core of their character.

The frequent accounts of rebellion and complaint from Old Testament Israel contrast with the New Testament account of the temptation of Christ which is recounted in terms deliberately evocative of Israel's experience, including the wilderness setting and the recurring quotations from Deuteronomy (Matt. 4:1-11). Davies and Allison (1988,

p.352) note that 'Jesus, the Son of God, is repeating the experience of Israel in the desert ….'[110]

The experience of testing brought into focus Christ's determination to obey his Father, thus establishing a contrast with the unbelieving grumblers of Israel's wilderness generation, and to remain true to his mission. The core of his character was revealed in the crucible of the temptation.

Other individual examples of the tests of character include the stories of Joseph (Gen. 39) and David (2 Sam. 11) in which the two leaders behave in contrasting ways in sexual situations.[111] In Joseph's case the more immediate contrast is with the behaviour of his widowed brother Judah[112] who implicates himself in a sordid and embarrassing tale of apparent prostitution (Gen. 38). Joseph meantime, having suffered betrayal and slavery, refuses to accept the enticements of his master's wife, not merely on the ground of loyalty and respect to his master, but out of reverence for God (Gen. 39:9). On the other hand David is only reduced to penitence when it becomes obvious that God (and the prophet) are fully aware of what he has done. David is forced to plead for mercy and acknowledge that he had been 'brought forth in iniquity' (Ps. 51:5).[113]

It should be added that much of what the Bible says in relation to testing is not limited specifically to the testing of leaders. In the New Testament James' exhortation that trials

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[110] Although Guelich, while noting the Exodus background in Matthew and Luke's accounts, suggests that Mark may have had a Paradise background in mind (1989, pp.38-39).

[111] Firth has proposed that David's action owed less to lust and could be viewed as 'a claim of power over a rival' (2009, p.422).

[112] Although, as Alexander suggests, the reader needs to be attentive to other elements in the Judah story, not least its contribution to the royal theme (2007, p.206). See Hamilton (1995, pp. 431-432) and Wenham (1994, pp.363ff.) for discussion of the juxtaposition of the stories.

[113] Longman (2014, p.loc.3410) observes that the psalm 'was written not to memorialize that moment, but to serve as a model prayer for others coming later who find themselves in similar, though not identical, cicrumstances.' Not everyone is convinced by the Davidic attribution (see Anderson, 1972, p.389).

of various kinds[114] should be seen as an occasion for joy (Jas.1:2) because of their potential to promote maturity was addressed to a whole community of first century believers, not specifically to their leaders. While leaders may expect to be tested, it is not testing that sets them apart as leaders.

Both adversity and prosperity reveal a leader's character and draw attention either to strengths or to weaknesses that a leader will need to address. Vic's family crisis forced him to realise the inadequacies of his character and led eventually to a move to a smaller church.

> I eventually chose to go to this tiny church … which is all part of this story, because I realised – and this is where the self-awareness came in – I realised that God had endowed me with gifts, but not with the maturity to use them.

The previous section discussed the example of Shirley and her journey of learning to forgive someone who had manipulated her and attempted to destroy her reputation. The crucible which was painful, and whose pain was probably intensified at least initially by the intervention of Shirley's mentor, did not produce an instant result as it was several months before she was able to reach a point of forgiveness. However in being able to forgive, she demonstrated a virtue which most would agree is one of the cardinal qualities of Christian character. What she gained in terms of her character was forged in the harsh crucible of testing.

6.3.1.4 Spirituality

Closely related to the issue of the leader's character is the issue of the leader's spirituality. As previously mentioned, Chandler (2009, p.284) highlighted the importance of pastors nurturing a relationship with God.

The spirituality themes that I have highlighted from the research interviews have less to do with spiritual disciplines (though some of these were mentioned) and more to do

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[114] 'James deliberately casts his net widely, including the many kinds of suffering that Christians undergo in this fallen world…' (Moo, 2000, p.54). McKnight, on the other hand, prefers to narrow the reference cautioning that 'it is … unwise to broaden terms when the terms do not permit that. In "trials of any kind" one might think James has everything and anything in mind, but the text is not this general' (2011, p.76). He prefers to understand James as referring to persecution, not least economic (p.75). See also Martin (1988, p.15).

with the way in which crucible experiences appeared to contribute to a leader's relationship with God.

6.3.1.4.1 The leader's awareness of the character of God

It has been observed (Packer, 1973, pp.22-23) that it is possible to 'know a great deal about God without much knowledge of him':

> The question is not whether we are good at theology, or 'balanced' (horrible, self-conscious word!) in our approach to problems of Christian living; the question is, can we say, simply, honestly, not because we feel that as evangelicals we ought to, but because it is plain matter of fact, that we have known God, and that because we have known God the unpleasantness we have had, or the pleasantness we have not had, through being Christians does not matter to us (Packer, 1973, p. 24)?

While he obviously does not use the term, Packer's comment here points to the possibility of one's knowledge of God being a source of resilience in a crucible experience: hence his plea for Christians to cultivate such knowledge. The other side of this coin is that it may be crucible experiences that allow leaders to grow in knowledge of God, as their grasp of aspects of God's character takes on an 'existential intensity'. This renewed awareness of God carries echoes of Job's acknowledgement that 'I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you' (Job 42:5). Few leaders are required to endure crucibles as intense as Job's.[115]

One particular aspect of God's character that featured in the leaders' stories was the love of God.

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[115] With regard to the historicity of the book, Longman argues that the truthfulness of the book's insights 'does not depend on the actual existence of Job' (2012, p.34). Estes cautions against *a priori* judgments on historicity in either direction but concludes that 'the book of Job … is better explained as a divinely inspired work of imaginative literature in which the author explores the lofty theme of the problem of evil by setting forth an ideal case study and then constructing a series of speeches that represent the best efforts by humans to resolve the issue (2005, p.19). Hartley (1988, p.67) suggests that the scant biographical details in Job's introduction results in 'a literary piece in which Job is representative of all who suffer'. Clines (1989, p.10) adds that the unresolved question of Job's race 'makes his experience transcend the distinction between Jew and non-Jew.'

6.3.1.4.2 The leader's experience of the love of God

It would be unsurprising to emphasise the importance of the leader's love for God, assuming that leadership on the part of a leader who does not love God will be deficient, not to mention culpable, given Jesus' summary of the first and great commandment (Matt. 22:37). Less obvious perhaps is the significance of the leader's personal awareness of God's love.

Burns et al. suggest that:

> Pastors often slip into the trap of building their identities around their roles and performance rather than being beloved children of God and co-heirs with Christ. Pastors need to pursue growth in their understanding of and feelings concerning God's acceptance (2013, p.32).

It was particularly notable that several of the participants discussed times when they became more aware of the personal nature of God's love for them.

> It was just a total assurance of his love. If ever there was a life-changing thing that was it (Stuart).

> I was loved. It had nothing to do with my performance. And that was, to say that was life-changing is an understatement (Steve).

> I felt so loved, so completely enveloped with his love and his presence that all fear was cast away (Vic).

> I felt soaked in the mercy of God … [It was] a really, really important engagement with God in my life. I think my ministry changed … it was as though the Lord reenergised my ministry at that particular point (Ian).

Clearly these are highly subjective interpretations of their experiences on the part of these leaders. More will be said about subjectivity later in this chapter, but the way these leaders have interpreted their experiences appears support Burns et al.'s claim that leaders must build their identity around the fact that they are 'beloved children of God'.

In this context it is certainly worth observing that Paul's prayer (Eph. 3:14-19), for all its grammatical ambiguity,[116] underlines the importance of 'knowing the love of Christ', something that 'cannot be other than an experimental knowledge' (Bruce, 1984, p.329). It seems, on the evidence of some of the interviews in this project that on occasion it is a remarkable, dramatic or intense experience that makes this knowledge more than intellectual.

Brain (2004) describes the relevance of the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith to the longevity of Christian leaders. He uses terms that come close to Steve's interpretation of his crisis experience in which he had 'the realisation of God coming and meeting me and communicating to me that I was valued because of the finished work of Christ':

> The realization that our value and worth, at least to God, is not tied to our performance, is liberating and of great profit in the way we view ourselves and our achievements. At one level I do not need to pretend that I am anything other than who I am … My self-esteem or self-worth is found in Christ, and not in my efforts, or in acceptance by others. This truth … needs to be built into our thinking and outlook, so that it can be constantly reaffirmed (2004, p.246).

Brain's prescription sounds like a measured dose of applied theology, perhaps best accompanied by 'conscious prayerful perseverance'[117] if the leader is to benefit. While Steve's grasp of what was essentially the same applied doctrine involved his mind, there was nonetheless a strongly subjective and crisis-induced element to his new awareness.

This suggests that on occasion the crucible may be a form of intensified learning opportunity, or even a short-cut, albeit a painful one, to new spiritual awareness.

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[116] The ambiguity of v.18 has given rise to a range of possible interpretations (see Muddiman, 2001, pp.170ff.).

[117] Brain suggests this course of action as a means of dealing with a leader's tendency to brood over failure (247).

6.3.1.4.3 Learning to trust God

The Epistle to the Hebrews underlines the essential nature of faith (Heb. 11:6) which the writer describes as 'the conviction/evidence of things not seen' (Heb. 11:1).[118] While the theme of faith runs throughout the letter, it is in particular focus in chapter 11 with its catalogue of ancient Hebrews who trusted God, and who are presented as 'examples of faith or faithfulness in the OT period' (Ellingworth, 1993, p.558).

Unsurprisingly, one of the 'centerpiece examples' (Cockerill, 2012, p.535) in the chapter is Abraham. The chapter refers to three incidents where his faith is tested and demonstrated. Far from getting easier, the tests increase in difficulty the further Abraham progresses.

Much as Abraham's journey through life was a journey of faith, several of the leaders talked about how their leadership journey too had been a journey of learning to trust God more.

> These difficulties, the more personal ones have been the means of allowing me to say, well Lord I don't understand but I trust you to work it out (Brian).

> God has inculcated into me something that is a gift of him and that is a capacity to know that he will not fail me and that I can trust him (Shirley).

> That's probably one of the greatest things that you need to learn on leadership too is the ability to strengthen yourself in God (Ruth).

Ruth had drawn inspiration specifically from the example of David who had to strengthen himself in God (1 Sam. 30:6). Brueggemann (1990, p.201) highlights the contrast between David's response to distress with that of Saul (28:15): 'David … is unambiguous about the source of his strength and need take recourse in no secondary religious pursuit.' The crucible forces a leader to a more conscious and deeper degree of dependence on God.

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[118] See Cockerill (2012, p.521) for a discussion on whether the word is best translated subjectively ('conviction') or objectively ('evidence').

Contrary to some superficially triumphalist views of what faith can accomplish, faith is sometimes most clearly seen in a leader's (or any believing person's) ability to rely on God when under severe pressure and testing. God may appear to be silent or his perceived actions difficult to understand. It is thus in the harsh crucibles of adversity that a leader's reliance on God may best be seen. The tale of Daniel's refusal to abandon his regular prayer routine, resulting in his being thrown to the lions (Dan. 6),[119] and the story of his friends, thrown into the fire when they refused to worship an image of the king (Dan. 3), bear this out.

They demonstrate a faith that lacks nothing in confidence but without becoming presumptuous: as Baldwin says 'they do not doubt the power of their God to deliver them from the king's furnace, but they have no right to presume that He will do so' (1978, p.104). Goldingay also highlights the unconditionality of their faith: like Job, their honouring of God is not dependent on his blessing (1989, p.74).

The author of Hebrews appears to allude to these incidents in his description of faith (Heb. 11:33-34).[120] Faith is the means by which people are enabled to become agents of great accomplishments, as seen in many of the chapter's Old Testament references, but it is also the means by which people are able to endure suffering and martyrdom.

The persevering faith demonstrated by Ruth is echoed in the stories of other leaders such as Stuart and Simon, who persevered through what became leadership-defining experiences, demonstrating the high degree of resilience that was noted in an earlier section of the chapter.

A leader's faith is both tested and strengthened[121] through crucible experiences that challenge the leader to depend on God. This is well summed up by Ruth Haley Barton's observation of Moses:

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[119] As Miller points out, 'Daniel's religious convictions were not hidden' and the extent of his commitment meant that not even the most severe punishment would cause him to back down. (1994, p.179).

[120] See Cockerill (2012, p.589).

[121] See James 1:3.

> He lasted because he allowed his leadership challenges to *catalyze* and *draw him into* a level of reliance on God that he might not have pursued had it not been for his great need for God which he experienced most profoundly in the crucible of leadership (2008, p.30).

6.3.1.4.4 Continuing to follow God

Both Graham and Ruth described how their leadership journey had been an ongoing journey of personal discipleship; indeed, as Simon explained, it can be difficult to talk about a leadership journey as though such a journey was separate from the rest of life.

> It's difficult in one sense to isolate out that ministry path from my, just general life path.

These observations point towards the importance of a properly integrated life, where Christian leadership is not merely an activity that is bolted on to the rest of the leader's life, but it is an outworking of the leader's discipleship. Not that the idea of the leader as a properly *integrated* person is exclusive to Christian leadership – Bennis observed that 'for the leader, as for any integrated person, life itself is the career' (1989, p.4) – but the biblical emphasis on character adds a degree of urgency to the pursuit of integrity.

In the context of Christian leadership, this means that the leader is always a follower. Despite the warnings of the difficult circumstances that would end his life, and his curiosity about the fate of his friend John, Peter was left in no doubt that he was to continue to follow Jesus (Jn. 21). As Carson observes, Jesus' challenge to Peter implicitly calls subsequent readers of the gospel to 'the same steadfast pursuit of the risen Lord (1991, p.680)'.

Boers sets *following* in contrast to the 'faddishness of *leadership*':

> Jesus had different priorities than teaching us to lead. 'Follow', however, comes up explicitly over thirty times in the Gospels. Whether or not all of us or anyone are called to leadership is not at stake; we are all called to be followers. Discipleship is first and foremost about *following*. *Disciple* indicates one who follows Jesus, 'a relationship that involves both commitment and cost' (2015, p.126).

This has been an important theme for Graham with his conviction that Christian living – for leaders as well as anyone else – needs to be seen as a relationship more than a religious practice. 'It's the relationship that supersedes everything else.'

> Even though as leaders, God has called us to be shepherds, I think one of the big mistakes some of us make as leaders is - we actually have forgotten we are still sheep.'

In terms of the biblical leaders, one might point to St. Paul, with his drive to 'press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus' (Phil. 3:14). His leadership journey would be difficult to separate from this calling.[122]

All of this carries the implication that Christian leadership and Christian discipleship must not be separated: the leader is more than what he or she does.

Thus the leadership journey is a journey of personal development and maturity where the leader's character is developed. Crucibles, both of adversity and of prosperity may highlight character flaws that need to be addressed and it is often in the crucible that a leader's relationship with God is deepened and intensified. This emphasis on the leader's character means that leadership should not be seen merely as a task that a leader carries out, but rather as an expression of who the leader is. In this sense, Palmer is right when he describes calling as 'letting your life speak'.

Or, as Vic commented:

> If you ask me what my ministry is about as a leader, it was simply God used my personality and I encouraged them to love God and to love each other … That's all I've done. And preached the word of God so that they'd love him and created contexts where I modelled what it meant to love each other and … it's really very simple. But that's what we're called to do, that's what the kingdom is. That's all we've been created for.

6.3.2 Calling to leadership

The second broad area was the crucible's relation to the leader's call to leadership.

Barton claims that 'being called by God is one of the most essentially spiritual experiences of human existence, because it is a place where God's presence intersects with a human life' (2008, p.76).

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[122] 'Paul tends to see all of Christian life in terms of "God's calling"' (Fee, 1995, p.349).

Much of the biblical narrative reflects the theme of God's call. From the voice of God addressing the fugitive Adam and Eve in Eden[123], through the call to Abram to leave the familiar for the unknown,[124] to the invitation of the Spirit and the Bride in Revelation,[125] Scripture is the call of God to his people. Not infrequently, the call represents an invitation, or a summons to play a particular part in God's work: 'a divinely orchestrated setting apart of the leader for some special task' (McNeal, 2009, p.loc.1411), or what Guinness describes as a special calling (2003, p.48).

One remarkable biblical call story is that of Moses, 'the most important and celebrated character in the Hebrew Bible' (Cohen, 2008).

6.3.2.1 The call of Moses

Moses' life story is a rich source for theological reflection on the leadership journey. For example, Barton views Moses' life as a window into various aspects of leadership 'in which we might learn to seek God and allow God to strengthen us to provide spiritual leadership to others' (2008, p.18). Indeed, his story has not only been mined for its religious significance, but has been proposed as a source for discussion of the ethical leader in the corporate world (Ben-Hur & Jonsen, 2012).

However, to engage with the story of Moses as it is recorded in the book of Exodus[126] requires an acknowledgement of critical issues that have occupied Old Testament scholars: alongside issues of authorship and genre (Dozeman, 2010), the nature of the history recorded in the book is perhaps the most significant.

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123 Wenham (1987, p.76) sees the call as a summons 'in order to demand an account of [man's] conduct.' On the other hand Hamilton (1990, p.192-193) prefers to detect a note of 'tenderness rather than toughness'. '[The Lord] is the good shepherd who seeks the lost sheep.'

124 A call in which 'the only thing made clear to Abram is that where he is now (Haran) is not where he is to remain' (Hamilton, 1990, p.371).

125 Although Revelation 22:17 is ambiguous. While the second half of the verse contains an invitation to the thirsty to come and 'take the water of life', it is not clear if the first invitation to come is directed to Christ (see 22:12), or should be interpreted in the light of the later invitations in the verse (Mounce, 1978, p.409). See the discussion in Boxall, (2006, p.318).

126 Around one third of the Old Testament's 770 references to Moses occur in Exodus (Bailey Wells, 2012, p.57).

In his discussion of the story of the manna (Ex. 16), Moberly (2007, p.225) refers to the German distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte*. He refers to Jasper's assertion that the former has to do with 'how events actually happened', while the latter refers to their meaning (Jasper, 2004, p.93). Bailey Wells suggests that it is 'misguided' to view the text as a record of history, at least 'in the modern sense of that idea' (2012, p.64).

Dozeman observes elements of the story that might encourage an historical interpretation, but concludes that 'the dates, the vague references to geography, and the unrealistic number of the group indicate that Exodus is not history' (2009, p.27). He also notes that discussion of the historicity of the events has further branched out to include archaeological studies along with the study of Ancient Near Eastern literature (2009, p.29).

However, Longman is reluctant to discard the view that Exodus is a witness of actual events' (2009, p.91). He suggests that there is 'fairly universal understanding that the book of Exodus is in some shape or form a work of history. The disagreement concerns whether the history is true or not' (2009, p.32). While he acknowledges that there is no direct evidence for the events of the exodus outside of the book of Exodus, and issues of dating remain unresolved, Longman's view is that the story loses its significance if it did not happen (pp.89, 91).

Obviously it would be beyond the scope of this thesis to begin to provide adequate answers to these and other important critical questions around the narratives of the life of Moses: the reflection that follows will '[treat] the text as the church has received it' (Dillard & Longman III, 1994).

By New Testament reckoning[127] Moses was eighty when he encountered God. No doubt the contrasting settings of the preceding eighty years contributed in various ways to the shaping of the man who would spend a further season of forty years leading the Hebrew slaves in a desert. Berlyn (2011, p.7) suggests that while adoption by Pharaoh's daughter would not have brought Moses royal status, it probably allowed him access to the highest levels of Egyptian society. His Egyptian upbringing would have allowed him to gain education, learn military skills and discover the wider world; his time in

[127] Acts 7:23, 30.

Midianite obscurity would doubtless have helped develop the contrasting skills related to shepherding. It is perhaps no coincidence that shepherding was a well-recognised metaphor for leadership (Cohen, 2008, p.16) in the Ancient Near East.

The biblical text has little to say about Moses' Midianite years. Yet the contrast between the forty-year-old would-be freedom fighter, forced to flee Egypt, and the eighty-year-old shepherd is striking. Admittedly the contrast between any eighty-year-old and his forty-year-old self is probably self-evident, but the reader who reflects on the excuses of an apparently reluctant leader cannot fail to notice the dramatic loss of previous passion and vision. Midianite exile proved to be a crucible of isolation in which Moses appears to have been stripped of much of his passion and vision.

It has been suggested that Moses' Midianite years are reflective of the time a leader spends in the desert and of the need for a leader's dreams to die 'if a deep soul is to be born' (Allender, 2006, p.133); leaders need something more than idealism to sustain them in their leadership. Barton notes that Moses' act as a forty year old was an act of anger and that 'being angry is not the same as being called' (2008, p.76). The gap in time, therefore, between Moses' attempt to project himself into leadership and his eventual call to leadership points to an important aspect of his call: arguably he was not ready at forty and work had to happen while he waited.

However, the call narrative involves more than the story of how Moses became the leader of his people. As Bailey Wells notes, it is the first of three theophanies[128] in Exodus, and this in a book that serves as a theological text in which God is the central character (2012, pp.55, 57). 'Exodus is essentially a book about knowing God through personal experience' (Alexander, 2002, p.157).

Technically, some have proposed that what happens in Exodus 3 should more properly be classified as a commission narrative than a call narrative, since the hero does not assume an office but is given a specific task to perform (Dozeman, 2009, p.120). Not all

[128] Brueggemann describes a theophany as 'an encounter in the life of a person or community whereby the future is radically and abruptly redefined' (2002, p.215). He lists Moses' encounter in Exodus 3 as 'the prime example' of such events.

agree (Childs, 1974, p.47), and the variation in nuance makes little difference to the purpose of this reflection.

What is striking about the biblical narrative of his call is the series of excuses that Moses offers in an attempt to dodge the call. Like Jeremiah, a later prophet in Israel's history, Moses is a reluctant spokesman who argues that he is unable to speak with any degree of eloquence (Van Seters, 1994, p.60). Perhaps his excuses were attempts to protect himself (McNeal, 2009, p.loc.272), and while one may have a degree of sympathy for Moses, given the rejection that he had experienced four decades earlier, his concluding objection leaves us in no doubt as to his fundamental reluctance.

Childs suggests that the description of Moses' call demonstrates 'that there remains a human initiative and will which, far from being crushed, remains a constitutive element of the one who is being sent' (1974, p.73). Nonetheless, his story surely also demonstrates that God's call is neither accidental, nor is it a casual invitation to be taken or left at the whim of the person called.[129]

Experiences such as those of Moses or Isaiah (Is. 6) in the Old Testament[130] and Saul/Paul in the New Testament (Acts 9), whereby the normal course of life is interrupted by a call to 'full-time ministry', appear to feature in the psyche of many evangelicals when they think about calling. However, while doubtless there is much to learn from them, one must ask whether they should necessarily be taken as normal templates for a call.

6.3.2.2 Reflections on calling

Guinness (2003) identifies four core elements of the biblical concept of call. To begin with, the word basically means what it says: '[its] straightforward sense and its obvious relational setting should never be lost' (p.29). Beyond that is the idea that 'to call means

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[129] Isaiah's call was more of a response to an open invitation.

[130] Van Seters notes the similarity between Moses' experience of a theophany and the experiences of Isaiah and Ezekiel (1994, p.65). Goldingay highlights how the accounts of Moses and Jeremiah emphasise their hesitation while the account of Isaiah's call portrays him volunteering. (2001, p.60). Commentators have differed on whether to understand Isaiah's temple experience as his initial call or a subsequent occurrence (see Oswalt, 1986, pp.171-2).

to name, and to name means to call into being or to make'; calling therefore involves our becoming what we are not already. Third, 'it is almost a synonym for salvation', and finally, 'this call is no casual suggestion.' Not only does Jesus call people to follow him, and call them to specific things; he calls them to a response of discipleship.

Guinness cites the classic evangelical writer, Oswald Chambers when he refers to the supernatural element of the call (2003, p.52):

> If you can tell where you got the call of God and all about it, I question whether you have ever had such a call. The call of God does not come like that, it is much more supernatural. The realization of it in a man's life may come with a sudden thunder-clap or with a gradual dawning, but in whatever way it comes it comes with the undercurrent of the supernatural, something that cannot be put into words.

Significantly, Chambers allowed for both a 'sudden thunder-clap' and a 'gradual dawning'. The interviews appeared to illustrate calling both as a dramatic intervention and as a gradual awakening.

For Palmer, vocation is a question of 'letting your life speak', of '[growing] into our own authentic selfhood' (2000, p.16). It is the place where self and service are joined.[131]

> Vocation at its deepest level is, "This is something I can't not do, for reasons I'm unable to explain to anyone else and don't fully understand myself but that are nonetheless compelling" (Palmer, 2000, p.25).

The discovery of one's vocation is a journey of self-discovery, involving both one's limitations and one's potential.

6.3.2.3 The experience of God's guidance

A related, but more general issue is the issue of being guided by God: how do leaders (or anyone else) discern God's call? Many evangelicals have tended to subscribe to a particular view of the will of God that has been outlined and critiqued by Garry Friesen (1980).

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[131] He notes Buechner's assertion that vocation is 'the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need'.

Among the leaders interviewed, Graham described the importance of several aspects of this traditional evangelical model when he talked about his call to ministry.

> Principles articulated in Colossians 3: number one, 'let the word of Christ dwell in you richly'; number two, 'let the peace of Christ rule in your heart'.
>
> I knew that if I started moving in the direction of becoming an auctioneer, the peace of Christ did not rule in my heart and I knew that wasn't in line with what people were telling me my giftings were.

There are effectively three elements here: the word of Christ (which Graham described as objective guidance), the peace of Christ (a subjective sense), and the advice of other people: these constitute several elements of the traditional 'road signs' that point towards God's plan. However, a problem with this understanding is that, as both Moo (2008, p.283) and Tidball (1999, p.165) point out, it is unlikely that Col. 3:15 is referring to personal, inner peace: there is a corporate dimension.[132] In the light of this we must ask if it is possible for God to guide someone based on questionable exegesis!

Larry's description of his sense of God's call to the church he has led for thirty years appears to include a strongly supernatural element in sensing God's call. He recalled hearing about the church becoming vacant.

> And as soon as I heard that I knew I was going … I've never had a sense of guidance before nor since; it was … as strong as, as soon as he mentioned, I knew we were going.
>
> [The hearing committee] all would have testified that as I walked up the steps to the pulpit, the Holy Spirit said to them, 'That's your man.'

It is not clear how the Holy Spirit communicated with the committee: just that they were convinced he had. Nor does the fact that it happened in this situation mean that the same kind of intervention should be expected every time. Friesen argues that while the Holy Spirit was clearly overseeing the growth of the Church in the book of Acts, it is:

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[132] 'The corporate dimension implicit in the talk of peace and of a people called is strengthened by the reminder that the call has in view "one body"… (Dunn, 1996, p.234).

> Only at decisive moments and in decisive ways [that God intervened] supernaturally to commission a worker, chart a particular course, or point in a specific direction. The rest of the time, He accomplished his purposes through saints obeying the moral will of God (1980, p.314).

Such 'decisive' interventions are in line with how God called people in the Old Testament, although, as Friesen notes, those commissions were limited to those called to a specialised, spiritual ministry, like judges, prophets and kings.

> While the concept of 'the call of God' is a prominent one in the New Testament, the vocational sense of the term occupies only a *minor place*. And when it occurs, it is never presented as pertaining to all believers (1980, p.314).

In response to the counter-argument that a strong sense of 'call' is needed if a leader is going to be able to navigate the difficult challenges of ministry, Friesen suggests that 'one's sense of a call, which was dubious scripturally and is highly subjective at best, lacks sufficient weight to function as the ultimate anchor in the heavy seas of Christian ministry' (1980, p.320).

Nonetheless the evidence of the experience of several of the leaders interviewed for this research points in a different direction, as the examples of Brian and Ian show. Brian was able to face the difficulty of his situation once he knew God wanted him to be in the church. It was 'the word of the Lord to me' that strengthened his resolve; Ian commented on the importance of having had a 'dramatic' sense of call as he has taken on new roles.

> There's a real sense … in which when I ever go through difficult times, the Lord has nearly always provided me with such a dramatic call to a particular role that I think … you can't gainsay that, that actually happened.

These comments appear to demonstrate that, far from 'lack[ing] sufficient weight to function as the ultimate anchor in the heavy seas of Christian ministry', for some leaders at least it is a strong subjective experience of calling that has strengthened their resolve for their leadership task: a factor in their resilience.

It should be said, however that among the leaders interviewed, there was also evidence of an alternative view of God's call and guidance.

> I am not convinced by the notion that there is one thing that a Christian should be doing. I think … the important thing is to be faithful within whatever you find yourself doing, rather than finding that thing that God has for you. I'm not saying that there aren't times where God can have something specific for you, I'm just not convinced that that is the norm. Which goes right against most mission views of calling.
>
> [There is] no angst at all about that. The question is, 'am I being faithful where I am?' Not 'am I in the right place?'
>
> I think the way some people present guidance is a bit like an Easter egg hunt where you've got to hunt around and find it. Whereas I tend to think of it more in terms of a buffet, where God is saying, 'Look at all these good things, which one do you want?' (Frank).

Frank introduced a further element when he argued that the role of the church becomes significant in helping a leader choose the appropriate path.

> It's not just what do I feel called to, it's what do I and the – well and [my wife] obviously – and the community to which I am, I belong and to whom I am responsible, what do they think?

Ian concurred and wondered:

> Is too much weight put on our call, rather than churches calling people out? I feel very strongly about that, actually. Prophets get a call, but elders in the New Testament, you call them out.

As the contrast between Friesen's arguments and the experiences of some of the leaders in this research demonstrates, individuals interpret the biblical evidence in different ways and their expectations of the call differ accordingly.

6.3.2.4 The testing of the call

An earlier section of the chapter observed that leaders might experience crucibles in which their calling is tested. In particular, Shirley had mentioned experiences where there was a difficult delay in what she believed to be her calling coming to fruition.

In this light it is worth considering the Old Testament example of Joseph. While his story functions as a link between the stories of the Patriarchs and the existence of the Israelites in Egypt at the time of the exodus (Alexander, 2002, p.139), by which time

they have gone from being 'a moderate-sized extended family' (Dillard & Longman III, 1994, p.57) to becoming a much larger group, it may also be read in the light of its contribution to the theme of royalty in Genesis and elsewhere in the Old Testament (Alexander, 2007), as well as functioning as evidence of the extension of God's promise to Abram, not least in the blessing of the nations (Wenham, 1994, p.344).

Observing how the stories of the Patriarchs point beyond themselves, Anderson notes how Joseph's story also contributes to the biblical theme of the 'beloved son' (2003, p.206). Joseph is a surprise choice on the part of his father (Gen. 37:3) and his story thus continues the theme of the setting aside of the firstborn (Alexander, 2007, p.204), already seen most notably in the story of Jacob and Esau (Gen. 27). Joseph becomes the subject of his brothers' rivalry and he must pay the price of his father's favour, by going down into the pit.[133]

Psalm 105 throws interesting light on Joseph's later experience – crucible – of prison, with its observation that 'the word of God tested him' (Ps.105:19 ESV). The psalm is a psalm of remembrance (Longman III, 2014, p.loc.5273) that reviews God's covenantal faithfulness to Israel. One section of the Psalm (16-25) deals with Israel's Egypt experience, beginning with the famine that led to Jacob and his family moving to live in Egypt: a key element in these events was Joseph's being sent ahead of his brothers (v. 17).[134]

Joseph's (God-given) dreams had not led immediately to fulfilment and he was forced to wait while 'his feet were hurt with fetters [and] his neck was put in a collar of iron'. Such circumstances were a far cry from the dream of his family bowing before him! Joseph's descent 'from favoured son to slave to prisoner' make it seem unlikely that his brothers will bow to him (Alexander, 2007, p.199).

Joseph had been betrayed by his brothers, had been sold as a slave, and his principled rejection of the advances of Potiphar's wife had been rewarded with more betrayal,

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[133] Anderson links this with the language of Psalm 30.

[134] Allen sees Joseph's experience as 'that of Israel in miniature' (1983, p.43).

leading to the harshness of prison (where he was forgotten). His 'call' to eventual leadership was severely tested.

Viewed in this light, the testing of the leader's call is not unrelated to the leader's learning to develop a greater trust in God. Joseph's trust in God will later be seen in full flower in his ability to welcome his brothers without bitterness. Whatever contribution they had made to his crucibles, God had been at work in the background.

Both faith and calling are tested by delayed fulfilment and it may only be in the eventual fulfilment that the leader is seen to be vindicated.

6.3.2.5 Questions about calling

We have seen that leaders' crucible experiences often relate in some way to their sense of calling to leadership, and this reflection has raised several issues about the concept. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt a definitive answer to them, but two main issues should at least be highlighted.

First, should prospective Christian leaders postpone their leadership journey until they have had some kind of subjective, and possibly dramatic call experience? Should Christian vocation be modelled on stories like those of Moses, Isaiah or Paul? If so, how should this calling be experienced, and why would the same expectations not accompany a 'call' to something other than vocational Christian leadership, say a call to become a surgeon?

Among the leaders interviewed, it was not unusual for a leader to refer to a subjective, sometimes dramatic experience. There was often a significant degree of subjectivity in leaders' experiences of the call. The longevity and apparent success of many of the participants' leadership makes it difficult to discount the validity of their interpretation of their experiences, even if at times they appear to rest on shaky exegetical ground.

A second significant issue that merits further reflection in discussions of 'calling to ministry' relates to the role of the Christian community. What if calling were discerned less as an individualistic exercise and viewed more as a community exercise? Parker Palmer's somewhat amusing recollection of a Quaker 'clearness committee' comes to

mind.[135] Certainly there is biblical precedent for an exercise in communal discernment,[136] and it was interesting that two of the participants in the interviews (both senior leaders, one in a denomination, the other in mission) spoke about their view that the role of the church needs to be emphasised. No doubt there is scope for different models of how this might happen, and it may prove to be a counter to overly-individualistic or overly-subjective thinking about the call.

6.3.2.6 Defining marks

Finally in this section, something should be added about leaders whose leadership calling takes on a defining characteristic. The biblical texts describe leaders who are remembered for a particular theme or emphasis in their leadership. Two examples suffice, one from each Testament.

An Old Testament example is that of Nehemiah whose concern for the wellbeing of Jerusalem leads him to ask his visiting brother for news (Neh. 1:2). Although it is unlikely that Nehemiah had lived in Jerusalem, news of its disarray reduces him to a state of despair: his concern clearly extends much wider than the fate of his family (Breneman, 1993, p.169). It is worth comparing his concern with the sentiments expressed by the anonymous author of Psalm 137, written against the backdrop of the taunts of Babylonian captors. His strong emotional reaction and the theological wealth of his prayer[137] (the first of nine in the book) demonstrate his deep attachment to his heritage, and it is from this crucible that he emerges with a plan for the city's restoration.

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[135] In *Let Your Life Speak* Palmer gives an entertaining account of how his aspiration to be a college president was wonderfully shot down (p.46).

[136] See the example of the prophets and teachers in Antioch (Acts 13).

[137] 'Much of the prayer is a mosaic of earlier biblical phrases which had no doubt been absorbed into liturgical patterns and so were thoroughly familiar to Nehemiah' (Williamson, 1985, p.172).

As with other biblical accounts already referred to in this chapter, it is important not to allow the quest for resonance with leadership themes to mask more significant theological themes in the book, a particular temptation in reading Nehemiah.[138]

Both Nehemiah and Ezra[139] appear to be deeply concerned about the purity and integrity of the covenant people. Thus the book of Nehemiah is not merely about rebuilding walls: it is about renewing covenant,[140] something that is reflected in the place given to the reading from the Law in chapter eight, to the detailed confession in chapter nine, to the names and commitments of the people who pledged allegiance to the covenant in chapter ten, and to the efforts of the returning Nehemiah to enforce the elements of the covenant in chapter thirteen.

Nehemiah and Ezra also devote considerable space to the recording of names and offices, reflecting a concern to demonstrate evidence of legitimacy, not least in terms of the priesthood. Such lists also give evidence of continuity with the past. Clines observes that the books of Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah are keen 'to stress the continuity between the pre-exilic Judean state and the community of returned exiles' (1984, p.25). Breneman adds that the returnees 'needed to recognize their roots in the preexilic Israelite community as reassurance that they were the continuation of God's redemptive plan, that God would not forsake them' (1993, p.79).

While Nehemiah's story cannot be reduced to being merely about leadership, it is, nonetheless, a vivid portrayal of the leadership task. In Ian's words, it is a 'Popeye moment' that projects Nehemiah into his life-defining leadership role: faced with the brokenness of Jerusalem, he 'can't stand it no more'.

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[138] The temptation to read the book as a manual for Christian leaders is seen both in popular literature such as Swindoll (1978), and in more academic publications such as Maciariello (2003).

[139] Traditionally, what are now regarded as two separate books were viewed as a unity (see Fensham, 1982, p.1), Williamson, 1985, p.xxi)..

[140] Note Levering's observation that 'Neh. 1-6 has to do primarily with holy land while Neh. 7-13 has to do primarily with holy people' (2008, p.117).

A further biblical example is that of Saul/Paul whose Damascus Road crucible (Acts 9) transformed his understanding of Jesus,[141] leading him to renounce his confidence in his attachment to the Mosaic Law (Phil. 3) and shape a gospel in which old distinctions of class, race and gender would be irrelevant (Gal. 3:28). Such was the dramatic transformation in his thinking that Paul eventually came to describe his former religious credentials as rubbish (Phil. 3:7). Bruce describes the Damascus Road experience as 'a conversion of will, intellect, and emotion, which dictated the abiding purpose and direction of his subsequent life and activity' (1988, p.183).

However, to describe what happened to Saul/Paul on the road as 'conversion' is not without controversy. Longenecker questions whether what happened is best thought of as 'conversion', 'transformation', 'alternation', or 'call' (1997, p.xiii). As Capes et al. put it, 'what actually happened to Saul-Paul is the subject of a debate based in large part on different interpretations of the evidence from Acts and Paul's letters' (Capes et al., 2007, p.83). Having surveyed the biblical evidence, and some of the recent scholarship relating to the Lutheran understanding of Paul's experience, they argue that 'for Paul there was no religion to convert to, in the modern sense. Besides, Saul did not see himself as leaving his ancestral faith' (2007, p.93). Nonetheless they go on to say that 'from [their] perspective, good reasons exist to describe Saul's transformation as a conversion' (2007, p.93). They note the dramatic nature of his experience, the establishment of new affiliations and a re-evaluation of his past, and his adoption of a different way of being Jewish – one that he had previously rejected. Ashton's summary to the question of the appropriateness of the term 'convert' is helpful:

> If, in saying Paul was a convert you simply mean that his life was radically changed, the answer is yes; but if you mean that from being a Jew he immediately became a Christian … then the answer is no (2000, p.77).

Whatever one calls it, Paul's encounter with Christ, like Nehemiah's hearing the news from Jerusalem, was a crucible from which he emerged with a new focus and direction. His previous way of life was re-evaluated and this fuelled his barrier-breaking mission and preaching. The energy that had previously been directed towards the elimination of

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[141] 'Within the span of a few days, Saul changes from Jesus' opponent to his exponent…' (Van Bruggen, 2005, p.18).

the new movement of followers of Jesus was henceforth directed towards the proclamation that Jesus was Lord. As Capes et al. observe, 'the Christophany [on the Damascus Road] holds a prominent place as the catalytic force in his spiritual transformation' (2007, p.94).

In the terms of Bennis and Thomas (2002, p.99), 'crucibles are places where essential questions are asked'. One might add that new callings are received and new life-directions are established. Visionaries like Ian and Shirley lead as they do because of situations which cry out for change. Tough crucibles led Simon and Stuart to draw clear markers in a way that has given definition to important parts of their leadership.

6.4 Evaluation of the significance of crucible experiences

In this final section of the chapter I wish to address three significant issues that arise from the research.

6.4.1 Subjective experience and meaning-making

While leaders learn and grow through experience, Thomas cautions that 'experience by itself guarantees nothing' (2008b, p.4). The crucible is an incentive to find meaning and may be viewed as an intensified learning opportunity. The leader is thus both a (subjective) interpreter and a learner.

Discussion of interpretative phenomenology in chapter 3 referred to Smith et al.'s view that a double hermeneutic is at work: not only is the participant involved in making sense of experience, but the researcher is attempting to interpret the participant's interpretation of his or her experience (2009, p.3).

The fact that this is a joint quest for meaning (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p.loc.2083) means that the fingerprints of the researcher cannot (and need not) be removed from the findings of qualitative research. Hence the themes that have been reported are a product of 'the fusions of the researcher's horizons with those of the participants' (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p.loc.2083). Thus it is likely that my own interests and experience as a leader will have influenced my hearing of the participants' stories and my ordering and evaluation of themes.

King and Horrocks claim that the task of phenomenological research 'is to obtain something as close as possible to another person's way of perceiving the world' (2010, p.211). The interviews furnished multiple examples of leaders seeking to make sense of their experience and, as Christian leaders, seeking to interpret the character, voice and actions of God in those experiences. As would be expected in an exercise in hermeneutic phenomenology, there has often been a degree of subjectivity, not least in accounts of experiencing God speak, or sensing his call, and there is little doubt that the subjective nature of some of the interpreted experiences could lead to questions about the validity of the participants' interpretations. In addition, as was outlined in chapter 3, any generalisations must be made cautiously.

The preceding section (6.3) has acknowledged some of the questions that have arisen as a result of leaders' often-subjective experiences in relation to their call. Here I wish to note two further issues related to experience.

6.4.1.1 Charismatic experience

Several leaders described 'charismatic' experiences that had been part of their spiritual journey, whether speaking in tongues (Ian), experiences of healing (Ian) or 'prophetic words' (Graham, Noel). Stuart and Ian both referred specifically to Toronto.

In January 1994 the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship began to experience a remarkable, if controversial, series of phenomena which supporters came to see as a movement of renewal or revival. Margaret Poloma (1997) has written both as a charismatic Christian, so an insider of the movement, and as a sociologist, attempting to occupy a middle ground of 'dialogue between sterile scientific analysis of charismatic undertaken by priestly sociological practitioners and the vital, prophetic nature of the movement itself' (1997, p.258).

Her detailed observation of 'fruit' of Toronto led her to posit that:

> While we may wish God worked in more cerebral ways, it is clear to us that he is using the prayers of nameless and faceless prayer team volunteers, the controversial manifestations, and intense emotional experiences to bring people closer to himself (1998, p.60).

By no means everyone shared her assessment, some expressing 'great misgivings about the events and manifestations of the Toronto Blessing' (Smith, 1999, p.30). However

the effects of the movement spread, with churches in other parts of America and in the UK being affected.[142]

Both Stuart and Ian referred specifically to Toronto in describing their experiences of the love and mercy of God. Stuart's experience (in the mid-nineties) had been in the context of a conference that he specifically located within the Toronto 'stream'. His experience of being prayed for ('I was out of circulation for about 45 minutes'), and his encounter with God, dealing with 'things that severely troubled me' appear to cohere with Poloma's observations of 'spiritual healing', which she sees as 'the removal of perceived barriers to divine intimacy' (1998, p.261).

While Ian's 'mercy of God' experience took place while he was on a visit to the Toronto church, it was actually removed from the rituals and manifestations of the 'Toronto Blessing' and might possibly be dismissed as a subjective interpretation facilitated by Ian's personality. That is not to deny its reality or its significance for Ian. However elements of Stuart's experience, such as being 'out of circulation' for a period of time, were observable by others and appear to fall into the pattern of many of the Toronto manifestations.

Not everyone will be persuaded by these accounts, or at least Ian's and Stuart's interpretations of their experiences: Stuart acknowledged as much when he admitted that his story could be 'absolutely laughed out of court'. A similar thing could be said about other charismatic experiences described in the interviews. Critics of the Pentecostal/Charismatic Movement have long critiqued what they see as its privileging of experience over doctrine.[143] To attempt a definitive evaluation of contemporary charismatic experience is beyond the scope of this thesis, and given the amount of ink that has been spilled on the issues by theologians of varying persuasions, it would be unlikely to be definitive!

From the point of view of phenomenology, the experiences, and the meaning attached to them by the participants, are what they are. As Janson noted (2008, p.76) 'the impact

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[142] Poloma cites the example of Holy Trinity Brompton, the London congregation which became the birthplace of the Alpha movement.

[143] See MacArthur (1978).

of a formative experience on a leader depends more on the meaning the leader can make of it rather than on the experience itself'.

In terms of practical theology, the participants themselves have engaged in theological reflection as they have sought to interpret their experiences in biblical terms (Stuart) and to evaluate phenomena in light of their biblical interpretation (Ruth).

6.4.1.2 Experience as a source of theology

This discussion also needs also to be considered as part of the wider question of the validity of human experience as a source of theology.

Few would dispute that it is the nature of theological reflection to bring human experience into conversation with the tradition: the written documents of the tradition need to be connected with the living human documents of the believing community. However the relationship between the two sources is subject to greater debate. Is one to be privileged over the other? Killen and DeBeer caution that both the standpoint of certitude, by which they mean 'Christians [accepting] the Bible or official church teaching literally as God's Word, providing an absolutely clear set of directions for life' (2007, p.7), and the standpoint of self-assurance, which leads us to be overly confident in our own understanding of our experience, hinder a genuine conversation.

Similarly Bennett (2015, p.134) notes the polarisation between those who fear the tyranny of the experience, and who prefer to sit 'under the text' and those who fear the tyranny of the text and are therefore suspicious of the Bible.

It has already been noted[144] that many evangelicals are uneasy about conversations that call for the privileged position of the Bible to be suspended. Those who are eager to root their theology in Scripture will be wary of attempting to build any kind of theology on the basis of human experience. Chapter 3 has already commented briefly on evangelical understanding of the Bible's authority.

Busby (2008) offers an attempt to validate the practice of theological reflection while proposing several specific considerations for evangelicals. Not least among these is his

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[144] See chapter 3.

plea for recognition of 'an eternal authority outside personal experience or community story sharing' (2008, p.74). The ideographic nature of hermeneutic phenomenology, and the ensuing challenges for generalization support his caution.

He goes on to state that spiritual truth is revealed 'through the written Word and the Living Word, Jesus Christ'. Yet this is no excuse to retreat into dogmatism: Busby suggests that experience provides an opportunity to revisit preconceived ideas 'in light of God's revelation, but always under the light of its authority' (2008, p.74).

The interviews demonstrated examples of leaders attempting to relate their experience to the biblical tradition. While there were examples of phenomena whose verification sometimes appeared to depend on coincidence, nonetheless experiences and subjective interpretations were often viewed in the light of Scriptural teaching or expressed in terms of specific Scriptural themes. For some of the participants this meant connecting an aspect of their calling or their experience of God with a specific text; for others it was a determination that practice and spirituality were 'biblical'.

To borrow from Killen and DeBeer, both the leaders themselves and this reflection have sought to '[bring] experience into conversation with the wisdom of the Christian heritage' (2007, p.127).

6.4.2 On definitions

Bennis and Thomas acknowledged that '*crucible* is an almost infinitely elastic term that is ultimately defined by the person transformed by it' (2002, p.96). *Geeks and Geezers* included stories that ranged from Sidney Rittenberg's imprisonment to Tara Church's dramatic realisation as a young girl that the use of paper plates contributed to the deforestation of the rain forests.

The obvious difficulty with a term's elasticity is that the term can become meaningless. After all, if everything can be a crucible, is anything, really, a crucible? One might reasonably quibble with Bennis' and Thomas' decision to extend the definition of the term to include upbeat and joyous experiences: 'crucibles' sound as though there is likely to be an element of pain.

However what is particularly significant is that the crucibles function as defining moments in which a leader's identity and leadership are shaped.

> It is a defining moment that unleashes abilities, forces crucial choices, and sharpens focus. It teaches a person who he or she is. People can be destroyed by such an experience. But those who are not emerge from it aware of their gifts and goals, ready to seize opportunities and make their future. Whether the crucible was harrowing or not, it is seen by the individual as the turning point that set him or her on the desired, even inevitable course (Bennis & Thomas, 2002, p.16).

While it is true that the choice of another term,[145] even one as general as 'momentous events' (Olivares 2011), might have avoided some of the issues raised by the elasticity of 'crucible', the retention of the term is justified. First, the vivid nature of the metaphor adds to the appeal of the term and second, the inherent themes of testing, transformation, and shaping are important and significant aspects of a leadership journey.

However it has to be acknowledged, as Paterson and Delight have observed, that some of what shapes a leader is 'more akin to a gradual evolution' (Paterson & Delight, 2014): this point is developed in the next section.

Even if a small number of leaders manage to escape the harsher crucible experiences, most will encounter life- and leadership-shaping moments, and many, not least pioneers and visionaries, will experience sudden moments of illumination that lead to new ideas and initiatives.

6.4.3 Other factors that contribute to the making of a leader

Something needs to be said about the question of whether 'crucibles' necessarily tell the whole story of leader development.

As has already been mentioned in chapter 2, Robert Allio was not convinced by Bennis' and Thomas' claims, raising several significant questions about their methodology and conclusions. Do some non-leaders exhibit the same attitudes as leaders? Do some leaders exhibit other attitudes than those presented by Bennis and Thomas? Is a crucible experience an essential element in the shaping of a leader? (Allio suggests that this is not the case). He wondered if 'crock-pot' might be a more fitting metaphor.

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[145] See the discussion of terms used in chapter 2.

In personal correspondence he clarified this point:

> I was indeed suggesting that the leadership psyche evolves through a series of experiences rather than through a singular epiphany … However – it may well be the case that individuals experience sudden insight into the meaning of life and man's purpose (Allio, 2015).

It is perhaps somewhat unfair to equate the crucible phenomenon to 'a singular epiphany', given that Bennis would later claim that 'we are rarely shaped for all time by a single trial or challenge, but that we encounter crucibles throughout our lives that try and change us' (2010, p.199).

Nonetheless the concept of Allio's crock-pot appears to be supported by Paterson and Delight (2014) who compared the findings of their study of leadership development with Thomas' ideas about the importance of crucible experiences. Their results partially supported Thomas' proposition, in that some interviewees reported the influence of significant and challenging experiences, not least where they have demonstrated a willingness to seek out roles that would stretch them. However they also found evidence that other learning experiences 'more akin to a gradual evolution' had a role to play.

The current research concurs. There are more than crucibles at work in leader development. Two important factors, one specific and the other more general should be mentioned.

6.4.3.1 Specific: influencers and mentors

Bennis claimed that '[he knew] of no leader in any era who hasn't had at least one mentor' (1989, p.91). In their survey of strategies on the part of the Presbyterian Church (USA) to reduce levels of burnout among clergy, Francis et al (2013) highlighted the positive effect of a mentoring relationship in contributing to enhanced satisfaction.

Bennis and Thomas suggest that mentoring relationships can be a form of crucible (2002, p.89). However, unless the relationship is quite intense and obviously transformative, to define it as a crucible may be stretching the meaning somewhat. On the other hand a specific intervention on the part of a mentor or influencer may constitute a crucible experience, as happened in Shirley's story of a trusted mentor who challenged her about her need to forgive someone who had badly wronged her.

> He didn't massage my ego or pain or anything. He just said, 'You have to forgive him; there is no way out.'

Nonetheless, while the influence of various figures in the lives of leaders may sometimes constitute a crucible, we should not overlook the on-going, incremental nature of much of that influence.

> [There were] people who to me are today the same as they were then; there's been an integrity that's run through them like rock.
>
> I think it was who they were, their enthusiasm for the faith, and their integrity and, I think they certainly taught me the basics of the Christian faith.
>
> Their enthusiasm and their love for God just encouraged me to want to go and be like them (Larry).
>
> So we were seeing these guys, not just standing up at the front teaching … we were seeing how they related to their wife, what they were like at home (Graham[146]).

Sometimes these influencers, like Jethro, contributed in specific circumstances. Larry referred to the influence of a respected mentor and described his encouragement during the crucible of a leadership crisis he was facing over a building project:

> Larry, you've got to lead … you've got to stand up and tell the congregation you believe this is right. And he said, 'How do you know you're a leader? You'll know then if you turn round, sheep are following.'

Several leaders mentioned the influence of their parents, in particular their father.

> My parents were without doubt the most formative influencers on me (Tim).
>
> My dad was a pastor and was the finest man I've ever known. He was the real deal, very honest, humble, kind of cheerful, godly man … He became in the course of time the living embodiment or incarnation of the highest ideals of that church, so that he had… I just watched him exert leadership and influence and authority without even trying, and often without even knowing it. His being who he was represented what that church

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[146] It was striking to hear Graham mention that one of the people who had influenced him in this way had prayed for him every week for fifty years.

> cared about and believed in most deeply. So that was a significant experience for me: just to observe that kind of unforced, almost transcendent, most effective leadership that exists (Simon).
>
> [My father was a] huge mentor … in many, many ways … He really did form us … and formed me in a way of giving me a capacity to always ask the deeper question … He certainly … left me with that as a memory, that it was when you believe in something you do not give up on it, you don't walk away (Shirley).
>
> Dad was a very big influence on my life, I mean, he is an amazing man of God and, you know, has really taught me so much in terms of a personal relationship with Jesus (Ruth).
>
> The reason why [my father] had such an influence upon me was he was such a godly man. I cannot remember a single thing in my upbringing that my father said or did of which I could be the least ashamed. He just lived what he believed with such integrity (Vic).

Specifically, Vic's father had had an impact on him because of the way he spoke about a Roman Catholic nun: 'You know, Vic, Mother Patrick really loves the Lord.' In the context of the strongly Protestant/Loyalist town where Vic grew up, this was a striking statement for a fundamentalist Protestant to make[147] and became a seed for his future leadership.

In contrast, it was striking that several leaders in the sample reported the early loss of their father and the resultant impact on their own development:[148] at times it helped cultivate a sense of responsibility (in the case of Graham), but it could also lead to a degree of independence (as in the case of Brian whose independent spirit was a barrier to leadership).

The fact that fathers could have such an influence, almost as much by their absence as by their presence points to an important theme with echoes in the biblical texts. Apart from the references to God as Father, it is worth noting how Paul describes his

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[147] As an example of the climate at the time, Vic's father had lost customers when he appointed a Roman Catholic as manager of his family business.

[148] See the section on 'reversals' in chapter 5.

relationship with Timothy and Titus as that of a father to a child (1 Tim. 1:2; 2:2; Tit. 1:4). Of course, the mention of Timothy is a reminder of the significant influence of his mother and grandmother (2 Tim. 1:5, 3:14-15).

6.4.3.2 General: the accumulated wisdom of the journey

Secondly, and more generally, there was evidence of Paterson and Delight's (2014) 'gradual evolution' as leaders accumulated experience and wisdom throughout the course of their leadership journey. Noel commented that he had changed during the course of his leadership, 'just because of life and theology … I'm more rounded now.' Similarly, Frank commented, 'I think life has changed me and these [incidents] are part of life.'[149]

A comprehensive view of leader formation resonates somewhat with the findings of Shamir et al. (2005a), who explored the significance of the leader's biography and highlighted four themes: namely 'leadership development as a natural process, leadership development as a story of coping with difficulties,[150] leadership development as a learning process, and leadership development as finding a cause' (p.20).

Character may often be developed as the result of a series of events or circumstances, some of them ordinary and far from what would be considered a crucible (see McNeal, 2009, p.loc.96). It is important to keep this more comprehensive view of leader-shaping in mind.

6.4.4 Summary

Crucible experiences are intense, transformative experiences that contribute to the shaping of a leader, and often play a significant part both in who the leader is and in the leader's calling. At times they are painful and at times they call for courageous leadership. In some senses they function as intensive learning opportunities where

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[149] It is worth noting Goodman's reflection on a leader's inevitable 'woundedness': while a leader's wounds can be problematic, they can also add to a leader's sensitivity. 'Rote features and leadership characteristics derived from a stale reading of Steven Covey guarantees nothing if it does not include the bumps and joys of the leader's inner world' (Goodman, 2007, p.51).

[150] They refer to the crucibles of Bennis and Thomas.

leaders extract 'gold' as they learn about themselves, about God and about their leadership.

Painful crucibles both call for, and demonstrate resilience. In addition there is evidence of the importance of gentler forms of development, such as further study, in helping cultivate longevity in leadership.

While crucible experiences may be significant, it is important not to lose sight of other, more incremental ways in which leaders are shaped.

The final chapter of the thesis will discuss some of the implications of the research suggesting areas for further research as well as suggesting ways in which this research may be able to serve leaders.

Chapter 7: CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

7.1 Summary

While the question of whether leaders are born or made is something of an old chestnut, evidence suggests that, at least to a significant degree, they are made. Part of their shaping takes place as they navigate a range of experiences along the way. Various terms have been used to describe these experiences: 'crucibles', the term used by Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas, is one. A crucible is an intense transformative experience that shapes a leader, causing him or her to ask important questions about themselves and their world.

The aim of the thesis has been to explore the significance of these experiences in the development of Christian leaders.

A phenomenological approach was adopted to access the data. Purposive sampling was used to select fourteen leaders who each participated in an in-depth qualitative interview lasting between two and a half and three hours. Interview transcripts were explored for examples of crucible experiences which were classified according to three types of crucible: new territory, reversal and isolation.

Analysis of the leaders' experiences appeared to show that crucibles were significant both in terms of the leader's character and in terms of the leader's calling. The themes were explored in the light of corresponding biblical insight.

It was recognised that while crucibles may play a significant role in the development of a leader, often functioning as defining moments or intense learning opportunities, they are not the only factors in leader development and a fuller picture must take account of more gradual influences.

7.2 Benefits of the research

McKenna et al. (2007) drew attention to the lack of research exploring factors relating to the development of pastoral leaders. This project, using the concept of 'crucible' experiences, makes a contribution towards the filling of this gap. The participation of

mainly older and thus experienced leaders furnished a rich series of accounts of resilience and perseverance through leadership-defining crucible experiences. These accounts have the potential to be a rich resource for the encouragement of younger leaders. The frankness with which many of the participants discussed their stories allows for a high degree of resonance, a key factor in the validity of qualitative research.

The use of Robert Thomas' three types of crucibles, subsequently adapted to incorporate significant experiences of Christian leaders, has resulted in a rich narrative framework with the potential to provide Christian leaders with a valuable tool for engaging reflectively in the evaluation of their own leadership journeys.

Possible benefits may be considered in relation to several groups.

First, there may be value in older leaders being encouraged to engage in a peer-accompanied, reflective review of their leadership journey. One of the leaders interviewed commented about the insights she had gained as the interview was conducted; another remarked on the positive affirmation he gained from having been listened to. Older leaders, particularly those who have experienced hardship and may not have had a high-profile ministry, may benefit from being helped to see the ways God has been at work in their lives and leadership.

Second, younger leaders in the early stages of their leadership journey should be encouraged to prepare for the tests and challenges that may be ahead. How can they think through what it means to experience God's call? How can they prepare for times when their character is tested or their leadership is opposed? How can they cultivate the kind of resilience demonstrated in the leaders surveyed?

Third, ways to bring younger and more experienced leaders together need to be explored. As suggested above, the research has tapped into a selection of stories that have the potential to provide encouragement to younger leaders. Examples of how this can be facilitated include conferences or seminars in which older leaders discuss details of their experience.

Additionally there would be value in adapting material from the research as a tool to facilitate mentoring relationships. The importance of mentors was an important theme in the interviews, as much for those times when a leader lamented never having had a mentor, as for those leaders who were able to recall positive influences.

7.3 Implications

Implicit in the discussion has been the belief that leadership is an extension of who the leader is, rather than merely something a leader learns to do. This should have fairly obvious implications for those who are involved in training leaders. While as much as possible should be done in terms of ensuring that leaders are equipped with the tools and skills necessary for leadership, this should not take the place of encouraging leaders to cultivate their character and their relationship with God.

In addition, many leaders who have led for some time clearly have a wealth of leadership journey experience that could be shared with younger leaders (see previous paragraph). It was significant that while most of the leaders were able to point to the influence of other leaders, the experience of intentional mentoring was a gap in some leaders' experience. Older leaders should be encouraged to actively seek opportunities to accompany younger leaders who are experiencing their own crucibles. The value of this is underlined by the idea that part of the function of crucibles appears to be as intensified learning experiences. As has been noted, leaders (and others) are interpreters of what happens to them: the input of more experienced leaders could help younger leaders extract the gold from their crucible.

7.4 Limitations and recommendations for further research

Chapter 6 has already acknowledged some of the difficulties with the elasticity of the term 'crucible', although its ability to function as a powerful metaphor for testing and transforming experiences justifies its retention.

Second, since the focus of the research was on the *meaning* of crucible experiences, a qualitative approach was appropriate: no attempt was made to measure the numbers of leaders who had experienced crucibles or the number of crucibles they had experienced.

Third, there is scope for systematic exploration of the *means* by which leaders were able to navigate or learn from their crucible experiences and how they demonstrated resilience, whether through cultivating a sense of call, through prayer, Bible reading, or the help of other people.

Fourth, as Bridge & Paller (2012) caution, complete accuracy of recall cannot be guaranteed. It would have been interesting to extend the interviews to include the

observation of spouses or colleagues: would they have added a different dimension to the recollection of the experiences?

Finally, the interviews focussed on people who are generally regarded as established leaders: some of them would be viewed by their peers as having attained a considerable degree of success over the course of their leadership. However not all leaders are successful and not all leadership journeys end well. Why do some leaders navigate their crucibles and grow through them, while others are derailed?

Several of these issues could provide scope for further research to be developed. In addition, further research questions might be suggested. For example:

1. How do the crucible experiences of evangelical and non-evangelical leaders differ in nature and function? Do theological presuppositions influence the kind of crucibles a leader encounters?
2. Do the crucible experiences of female leaders differ significantly from those of male leaders? One assumes that, for some women at least (as was the case in this research), there are crucibles inherent in leading as a female, especially in an otherwise male-dominated field.
3. Similarly, are there differences across cultures in the nature of crucibles encountered?
4. What is the relationship between a leader's personality type and his or her ability to navigate a crucible?

7.5 Personal reflections

Conducting this research has allowed me to have a privileged insight into the leadership journey of several leaders. It has been a privilege to listen to leaders who have humbly and honestly described their successes and their challenges as well as some of their rich experiences of God.

I have listened to leaders who have not always behaved well, who still have unanswered prayers and questions and who have struggled to deal with come of their crucibles. At the same time many of their journeys have been both fascinating and exciting. Their stories have shed light on some important episodes in the recent decades of the church in Ireland.

More personally, while the thesis has not involved a formal retelling of my own crucible experiences, it has nonetheless provided me with an incentive to explore the contours of my own leadership journey that includes its own experiences of new territory, reversals and isolation (my current phase). It has equipped me with a framework to explore these themes and helped sensitise me to issues relating to my own spirituality. Professionally, the work has involved several crucibles of new territory, with what have felt like some steep learning curves along the way. I hope that the knowledge (relating to several disciplines) and insights that I have gleaned during the course of the research and writing will have equipped me in a way that will increase the potential of my influence on other leaders.

7.6 Conclusion

Notwithstanding the further work that could be done, or the caveats with regard to definitions, the thesis demonstrates that the concept of leadership crucibles, with an emphasis on the elements of testing and transformation, provides leaders with the opportunity to construct a narrative framework that allows them to explore important aspects of their leadership journeys. The adaptation of Thomas' three-fold classification of crucibles leads to an anticipation of the kinds of tests leaders may expect to encounter, and the exploration of the outcomes of these tests may provide leaders with an awareness of the ways their crucibles may be functioning as intensified learning experiences, contributing both to the leader's character and leadership.

Appendix 1: Letter of welcome

Name
Address

Dear 'Name',

Following our initial contact in relation to this, I am writing to thank you for your willingness to participate in my doctoral research project on the significance of crucible experiences in the development of Christian leaders.

I must assure you of the confidentiality of your interview and guarantee your anonymity in the subsequent write-up of the findings. I hope that this will give you the confidence to explore freely crucible or life-changing experiences in your leadership journey. You should also know that your participation in the project is entirely voluntary and you will be free to withdraw your participation at any point without obligation to explain your reasons. If you have substantive concerns about the way the research is being carried out, you may contact the University of Chester as follows:

Professor Robert Warner
Executive Dean of Humanities
University of Chester Parkgate Road
Chester,
CH1 4BG

I am attaching several documents that require your attention.

1. A copy of the information sheet (which you have already seen);
2. Two copies of the consent form which you should sign and date: one copy is for your own records, you should return the other copy to me.
3. A copy of the basis of faith of the Evangelical Alliance, UK. As the study aims to draw on members of the evangelical branch of the church, you should be able to affirm this basis of faith.
4. A document to help you reflect on your leadership journey which you should use to prepare for your interview.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about any of this. Once I have received your consent form I will contact you in order to set up your interview.

Sincerely,

Alan Wilson

c/o Irish Baptist College
19 Hillsborough Rd, Moira,
County Down
BT67 0HG

Appendix 2: Information sheet

The Significance of Crucible Experiences in the Development of a Christian Leader

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether to accept the invitation, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask me or the university if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study is to explore an aspect of leadership development - namely the significance of 'crucible' experiences. The term has been drawn from the work of Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas, in their book *Geeks and Geezers*. It is a fairly elastic term which may be applied to any significant testing or shaping experience or set of experiences.

Why have I been chosen?

All of the participants are recognised leaders in the evangelical world, either leaders of churches or leaders of mission or other organisations. The range of participants will reflect diversity in terms of experience, denominational background (although each participant should be able to self-identify as evangelical), sphere of leadership and gender.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part you will be given a copy of this information sheet to keep and you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you decide to take part, and sign the consent form, you will be interviewed at a time which suits before the end of the year. Normally this will be a face to face interview, although if distance makes this impossible, the interview will be carried out via Skype. The interview is expected to last for 3 hours and will explore the following:

1. An outline of your leadership journey, which provides the context for your crucible experience;
2. An exploration of what happened in your crucible experience(s);
3. An opportunity to reflect on the meaning of your crucible experience(s), including what and how you have learned from it/them.

Before the interview you will be asked to spend preparatory time in guided reflection on your leadership journey. With your permission, the interview will be recorded and later transcribed in order to facilitate analysis of the research findings.

Once the interview has been transcribed, you will be able to review a copy of the transcription to help ensure that what you have expressed in the interview does not misrepresent you in any way. If you wish, you will be sent a copy of the completed dissertation.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

It is unlikely that participating in the research will carry any risks. However you should be aware that since you will be recalling and reflecting on formative experiences which may have been painful, there may be some emotional discomfort. As already mentioned, you will be free to withdraw your participation at any time. The interviews are not intended to be counselling or therapy.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

It is hoped that you will benefit personally from participation in a guided reflection on your leadership journey and the recognition that some of the more challenging experiences have actually helped shape you and helped you to become a more effective leader.

More broadly, by participating you will be contributing to a body of knowledge which it is hoped will help other leaders, not least younger leaders, as they navigate the challenges of their own leadership journeys.

What if something goes wrong?

If you wish to complain or have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this study, please contact:

Professor Robert E. Warner
Executive Dean of Humanities,
University of Chester
Parkgate Road Chester
CH1 4BJ
r.warner@chester.ac.uk
Tel. 01244 511980

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Every step will be taken to protect confidentiality and your identity. Data (both written and audio) will be stored in a password protected computer drive and your actual name will not be used in the reporting of the interviews.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of the research will be incorporated in my doctoral dissertation. It is hoped that an edited version of the key findings will also be made available in the future for the benefit of a wider audience. Individuals who participate will not be identified in any subsequent report.

Who may I contact for further information?

If you would like more information about the research before you decide whether or not you would be willing to take part, please contact:

Mr Alan Wilson c/o Irish Baptist College 19 Hillsborough Rd, Moira, County Down BT67 0HG jsalanwilson@gmail.com

Thank you for your interest in this research.

Appendix 3: Guided reflection

Preparation for the interview:

Leadership Journey Timeline

To help prepare for your interview, you should take some time to construct your own leadership journey timeline (see the example on page 2).

- Key stages (for example: education, training and preparation; early leadership experience; current, or most recent leadership responsibility);
- Major influencers (family, teachers, mentors etc.);
- Turning points (for example: conversion experience; change of career; moving to a new post);
- Defining moments (decisions that have shaped you, your values and your direction);
- Notable successes
- Painful failures
- Significant challenges

3-part interview:

1. General timeline of leadership journey
2. Highlighting key moments
3. Drawing lessons from key moments

Some key questions for reflection on significant moments in your journey:

1. What happened?
2. What did you learn about yourself?
3. What did you learn about God?
4. What did you learn about (your) leadership?
5. How have these changed over the years?
6. What led to the changes?
7. How have you managed to navigate the changes/crucibles?

Sample leadership journey timeline (Moses)

Key stages:

- 40 years in Egypt
- 40 years exile in Midian
- 40 years of leadership

Major influencers:

- Mother, sister, brother

Turning points:

- Intervention on behalf of Israelites - abortive attempt to deliver which led to his exile
- Dramatic call from God
- Choosing to strike the rock, so forfeiting the opportunity to see his leadership through to conclusion

Defining moments:

- His choice to identify with the Hebrews rather than enjoy his status as an Egyptian

Notable successes:

- Crossing the Red Sea
- Agency in miraculous interventions
- Intercession on behalf of the people

Painful failures

- Rejection by the people whom he attempted to rescue
- Succumbing to bitterness in striking the rock

Significant challenges:

- Leadership of a vast, hungry crowd of grumblers

Appendix 4: Consent form

Title of Project: The Significance of Crucible Experiences in the Development of a Christian Leader.

Name of Researcher: Alan Wilson

Please initial box

☐ I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet, dated ……., for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

☐ I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without my care or legal rights being affected.

☐ I have read, and am in agreement with the Evangelical Alliance basis of faith.

☐ I agree to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant	Date	Signature
J S Alan Wilson		
Researcher	Date	Signature

Appendix 5: Interview guide

Part 1 - An outline of your leadership journey, which provides the context for your crucible experience

1. What is your name and age (in decades)?
2. What is your current position? What does it involve? How long have you been in this position?
3. How would you describe your leadership style (directive, affiliative…)?
4. What were some of the earliest indicators that you were a leader?
5. Outline the major distinguishable stages of your leadership journey, discussing the turning points/transitions along the way. Are you able to say that each stage has contributed in some way to the next?
6. What have been some of the major highlights along the way?
7. Who have been some of the major influencers in your leadership journey and in what way have they contributed to your leadership?

Part 2 - An exploration of what happened in your crucible experience(s);

1. Describe your most significant leadership experiences. What has made them significant?

2. What incidents or seasons do you believe have had the greatest impact on you as a leader?

3. If we understand that a crucible is any kind of testing and/or transformative experience, what crucibles would you identify during your leadership journey?

4. Did you at any time during the experience contemplate stepping out of leadership (or did you need to step out of leadership for a season)?

5. What were some of the factors that you believe helped you to navigate the experience?

Part 3 - An opportunity to reflect on the meaning of your crucible experience(s), including what and how you have learned from it/them.

1. How would you describe the way in which your crucible experience(s) has/have contributed to you as a leader?

2. Have you changed? How? Why?

3. Have you ever taken time to reflect systematically on your experience and what impact it has had on you? If so, did you do this by yourself, or with other people (spiritual directors, counsellors, mentors)?

4. In what other ways have you tended to learn about leadership?

5. Describe the interplay between the crucible experience and your sense of calling as a leader.

6. What impact did the experience have on your relationship with God/knowledge of God and vice versa?

Appendix 6: Evangelical Alliance Basis of faith

WE BELIEVE IN

1. The one true God who lives eternally in three persons—the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
2. The love, grace and sovereignty of God in creating, sustaining, ruling, redeeming and judging the world.
3. The divine inspiration and supreme authority of the Old and New Testament Scriptures, which are the written Word of God—fully trustworthy for faith and conduct.
4. The dignity of all people, made male and female in God's image to love, be holy and care for creation, yet corrupted by sin, which incurs divine wrath and judgement.
5. The incarnation of God's eternal Son, the Lord Jesus Christ—born of the virgin Mary; truly divine and truly human, yet without sin.
6. The atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross: dying in our place, paying the price of sin and defeating evil, so reconciling us with God.
7. The bodily resurrection of Christ, the first fruits of our resurrection; his ascension to the Father, and his reign and mediation as the only Saviour of the world.
8. The justification of sinners solely by the grace of God through faith in Christ.
9. The ministry of God the Holy Spirit, who leads us to repentance, unites us with Christ through new birth, empowers our discipleship and enables our witness.
10. The Church, the body of Christ both local and universal, the priesthood of all believers—given life by the Spirit and endowed with the Spirit's gifts to worship God and proclaim the gospel, promoting justice and love.
11. The personal and visible return of Jesus Christ to fulfil the purposes of God, who will raise all people to judgement, bring eternal life to the redeemed and eternal condemnation to the lost, and establish a new heaven and new earth. (Evangelical Alliance, 2014).

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